Church Planting Practices among Muslim and Druze Communities in the Near East

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2018

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VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

Church Planting Practices Among Muslim and Druze Communities in the Near East:

A Conversation about Mission in the Light of the Early Church

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor of Philosophy
aan de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
op gezag van de rector magnificus
prof.dr. V. Subramaniam,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
ten overstaan van de promotiecommissie
van de Faculteit Religie en Theologie
op maandag 5 november 2018 om 13.45 uur
in de aula van de universiteit,
De Boelelaan 1105

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geboren te Adelaide, Australië

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This dissertation research was completed in co-operation with the International Baptist Theological Study Centre, a collaborative partner of the Faculty of Religion and Theology at VU Amsterdam.

Abstract

CHURCH PLANTING PRACTICES
AMONG MUSLIM AND DRUZE COMMUNITIES IN THE NEAR EAST:
A CONVERSATION ABOUT MISSION IN THE LIGHT OF THE EARLY CHURCH

This study asks the question, "How do the patterns of mission and church planting among Muslim and Druze communities in the Near East compare with those patterns in the early church movement during the apostolic period?"

What led me to ask this research question was a phenomenon I had recently observed. New faith communities based on the claims of Christ were and are still emerging among the Muslim and Druze populations in the Near East, communities that are rooted to varying degrees in the evangelical tradition. However, questions have been raised by other, more established evangelical communities as to the validity and orthodoxy of these new communities of faith. After some further exploration it soon became apparent that little academic research had been attempted to discover how these new communities had formed, what they practiced, and why.

Employing Case Study research methodology, this study examined five Christian faith communities (each community as a case) that emerged in Muslim and Druze societies and interviewed leaders and adherents associated with those respective communities. Eighteen semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted. As it appeared that these new faith communities shared the common evangelical view of Scripture as authoritative, not only in creed but also in practice, the thinking of a number of New Testament scholars in the areas of mission and church planting in the early church movement in the apostolic period was utilized as a means to elicit meaningful reflection from the interviewees. Their thinking became a valuable conversation partner, with the new faith communities asking questions of those scholars (in a sense) and being asked questions in turn. This process was conducted in two rounds of interviews. The thesis concludes with critical reflection on the contemporary practice of each of the fellowships, both in comparison with each other and in comparison with the scholarly thinking around the praxis of the early churches.

Samenvatting

PRAKTIJKEN VAN GEMEENTESTICHTING ONDER MOSLIM- EN DRUZENGEMEENSCHAPPEN IN HET NABIJE OOSTEN: EEN GESPREK OVER MISSIE IN HET LICHT VAN DE VROEGE KERK

Deze studie stelt de vraag: "Hoe verhouden de patronen van zending en gemeentestichting onder moslim- en druzengemeenschappen in het Nabije Oosten zich tot die patronen in de vroege kerkbeweging tijdens de apostolische periode?"

Wat mij geleid heeft tot het stellen van deze onderzoeksvraag is het volgende door mij waargenomen fenomeen. Nieuwe geloofsgemeenschappen gebaseerd op de aanspraken van Christus waren en zijn nog steeds in opkomst onder de moslim- en druzenpopulaties in het Nabije Oosten, gemeenschappen die in verschillende mate in de evangelische traditie zijn geworteld. Er zijn echter door andere, meer gevestigde evangelische gemeenschappen vragen gesteld over de geldigheid en orthodoxie van deze nieuwe geloofsgemeenschappen. Uit nadere verkenning werd al snel duidelijk dat er weinig academisch onderzoek was gedaan om te ontdekken hoe deze nieuwe gemeenschappen zich hadden gevormd, wat ze in de praktijk deden en waarom.

Gebruikmakend van casestudie onderzoeksmethodologie, onderzocht ik in deze studie vijf christelijke geloofsgemeenschappen (elke gemeenschap als een casus) die op zijn gekomen in moslim- en druzensamenlevingen en interviewde ik leiders en aanhangers verbonden aan deze respectievelijke gemeenschappen. Er werden achttien semi-gestructureerde kwalitatieve interviews afgenomen. Omdat bleek dat deze nieuwe geloofsgemeenschappen de gemeenschappelijke evangelische visie, waarin de Schrift als gezaghebbend geldt, deelden, niet alleen in belijdenis maar ook in de praktijk, werd het denken van een aantal nieuwtestamentici op het gebied van zending en gemeentestichting in de vroege kerkbeweging in de apostolische periode gebruikt als een middel om zinvolle reflecties te ontlokken aan de geïnterviewden. Hun denken werd een waardevolle gesprekspartner, waarbij de nieuwe geloofsgemeenschappen (in zekere zin) vragen stelden aan die geleerden en op hun beurt bevraagd werden. Dit proces werd uitgevoerd in twee interviewrondes. Het proefschrift sluit af met een kritische reflectie op de hedendaagse praktijk van elk van de gemeenschappen, zowel in vergelijking met elkaar als in vergelijking met het wetenschappelijke denken rond de praxis van de vroege kerken.

Acknowledgements

It is with great appreciation and gratitude that I wish to acknowledge my supervisory team, Dr. Tim Noble and Dr. Andrew Kirk, as well as my VU promoter, Dr. Bernhard Reitsma. Thank you for all the many hours you spent sharing your expertise and your godly counsel. In this regard also I would like to thank Dr. Perry Shaw, my on-field supervisor. You started this journey with me when it was just an idea. Thank you for all your very valuable time as we wrestled with making this idea a reality.

To my incredible family, especially my children, thank you for all the encouragement you gave along the way - you always believed it would happen.

I cannot begin to express the depth of appreciation that I have for my amazing wife, Laura. This thesis would not exist without the many hours of work that she gave to transcribing interviews and proofing the manuscript. Beyond that was her unwavering commitment to be there supporting and encouraging, through the ups and downs. You are the light of my life.

And finally to our loving heavenly Father. May this little piece reveal, even ever so slightly, more of what you are doing in this world. Be glorified.

Grant Porter
Coopersville, Michigan
September 8, 2018

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Introduction

Emerging fellowships of Christ-followers in predominantly Muslim-populated communities are on the increase in the Near East. It would appear that this phenomenon has occurred within the context of a greater regional interest in the Christian faith and the teachings of Christ, and that it has not occurred spontaneously. One of the main factors has been the intentional missional effort to present the faith claims of Christ, with the aim of planting new faith communities in these Muslim areas. As an aid to this effort, certain foreign church planting methods were imported from such diverse places as Colombia, the U.K., China, and North America. Though each method had been quite successful in its respective context (and other contexts), little evaluation was done regarding its suitability and effectiveness among Muslims in the Near East. Additionally, highly relational and learner-centered "simple church" methodologies based around inductive Bible study were introduced, notably from India and China,[1] while a growing debate emerged over Islamic "insider"[2] movements and the possible use of these movements as a church planting strategy. Each new methodology or strategy claimed the New Testament as a foundation, with a strong affinity to the early church movement of the apostolic period.

As the number of these fellowships grew, so the debate in the local evangelical community also grew regarding their status ("are they really churches?" and "is this just another foreign idea?") and their validity ("are these groups heretical?"). However, what became increasingly evident in the debate was a serious lack of actual engagement with these fellowships. Not only had little in-depth academic study been undertaken with the aim of understanding how these new communities of faith were formed or now function, but very few people from the evangelical community had even met an adherent of these groups or networks. Therein lies the problem. I surmised that little could be gained by discussing communities of which we knew little. This led me to develop this research question: "How do the patterns of mission and church planting among Muslim and Druze communities in the Near East compare with those patterns in the early church movement during the apostolic period?"

There were a number of reasons why I developed this research question. As little academic work had been done in examining the region's church congregations which consisted of predominantly Muslim and Druze background adherents, I thought it was critical to discover their contemporary practice, particularly in the areas of mission and church planting. In addition, it was significant to discover the reasons for and influences behind this current praxis.

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[1] See, for example, www.davidwatson.org and www.t4tonline.org.

[2] Any movement to faith in Christ where a) the gospel flows through pre-existing communities and social networks and where b) believing families, as valid expressions of the Body of Christ, remain inside their socio-religious communities, retaining their identity as members of that community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible. Rebecca Lewis, "Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24, no. 2 (2007): 75, 76.

By exploring their missional praxis, I hoped to discover not only what they did but also how they related to the wider society, particularly as these new churches did not share the same faith convictions as their communities. I wanted to also hear them articulate their vision for their congregation/house church and their vision for society and their role in it. I believed that by exploring these areas we could better understand who they are and how they see themselves - critical first steps in answering some of the aforementioned questions and making the move toward actual meaningful engagement. With the same goal I also felt it necessary to explore what these new church adherents said about church planting. This would enable me to understand how they formed community, what were their defining boundaries, particularly as many of them sought to remain within their communities, and how they viewed themselves. Understanding these areas was critical in being able to answer the questions of status and validity that were being raised by other evangelical churches.

Comparing the five churches or house church networks to scholarly reconstruction of early Christian community formation was a very useful means of exploration. The rationale behind engaging to some extent the early church movement as a conversation partner is expounded to a greater degree in "Early Church Voices"; however, in short, it did provide a means by which practitioners and adherents could reflect upon their praxis. As the adopted methodologies were claimed to be based on the New Testament, I wanted to discover the extent of influence, if any, the early church movement, which members of these communities were to varying degrees familiar with from their readings of the New Testament, had had on their mission and community formation. I had no intention of proposing that the practices of the early churches were a blueprint for church life to be replicated uncritically. It is worthy of note, however, that each of the Near Eastern congregations regarded the New Testament as sacred and that the teachings contained within it should be obeyed. Reflection upon early church praxis, particularly descriptions gleaned from New Testament readings, was therefore undertaken with a seriousness not necessarily extended to comparisons with other contemporary churches. I also believed that engaging the early churches in a comparative study that informed the interview questions (see methodological process in "Methodology") was a very valuable process in which areas for deeper discussion, brought to light by those comparisons, were able to be explored. Some of those areas may easily have been overlooked if the research had been restricted to a simple narrative. Again, the value of discovering what these Near Eastern churches from Muslim background actually do and why they do it cannot be underestimated. Not only is it valuable in informing the debate as to their validity in the region but their journey could also serve as a useful example for other emerging churches in distressed contexts to reflect upon the "relatability" to their specific situations.

The nature of the research question does preclude exploring other questions that are not only interesting but also worthy of focused study. For instance, one could ask in what ways do the

beliefs and praxis of the churches examined compare with the church growth movement or the contemporary thinking around the so-called "insider movement." However important these issues are, they are beyond the scope of this study, though, where appropriate, references will be made to the relevant literature.

As mentioned previously, there has been little academic research on Christ-following communities in the Near East. There have been numerous anecdotal accounts of churches that are beginning to emerge in Muslim communities.[3] Though inspiring, they nonetheless do not seek to present research with any amount of academic rigor. From the academic point of view, Mike Ghiz and Duane Miller in their doctoral theses each examined to varying degrees the phenomenon of people from Muslim background joining evangelical churches in the Near East.[4] The particular church contexts that they chose are akin in many respects to the City Church examined in the chapters entitled "Muslim Voices in Context I/II" of this thesis. Because of the specificity of their research, they did not examine gatherings of Christ-followers outside an officially registered evangelical church. This dissertation, in examining five different church contexts, is able to add those important voices to the body of knowledge around ecclesial expressions from people of Muslim background. Kathryn Kraft examined the different issues facing individual Christ-followers from Egypt and Lebanon who had a Muslim heritage.[5] My thesis adds to her admirable work by exploring issues facing newly-formed communities rather than those faced by individuals.

To answer this research question a suitable methodology was chosen, ethical issues were considered, and a Case Study methodology was adopted, designed for the context, and implemented. This is described in the chapter entitled "Methodology." "Muslim Voices in Context I" describes a series of semi-structured interviews with leaders and adherents of four (which later became five) churches. The aim of these interviews was to gain better insight into these fellowships, through the eyes of adherents and leaders alike.

After the eleven interviews were conducted a series of questions arose that would inform and guide the exploration into the early church movement through the writings of contemporary scholarship. This exploration is described in "Early Church Voices." In addition to examining the possible "whys" of early church praxis, questions around issues of identity, understanding

[3] For examples see Tom Doyle and Greg Webster, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012) and David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims Around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2014).

[4] Michael Joseph Ghiz, "*Towards a Biblical Theology of Mission to Arabic Speaking Muslims: Lessons from the Evangelical Churches' Work with Syrian Muslim Refugees 2011-2014*" (D.Min. diss., Acadia Divinity College, 2017) and Duane Alexander Miller, "Living among the Breakage: Contextual Theology-Making and Ex-Muslim Christians" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2013).

[5] Kathryn Ann Kraft, "Community and Identity Among Arabs of a Muslim Background Who Choose to Follow a Christian Faith" (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 2007).

relationships with family, society and with other members of the church, as well as the "hows" of community formation and mission were asked, so to speak, of the early church movement.

"Muslim Voices in Context II" details the observations that arose out of that discussion, observations which then strongly influenced the questions asked in the second round of seven interviews. These interviews were conducted with the church leaders and were in one sense the early church movement asking questions of the new emerging fellowships. The areas addressed focused on discovering how these new groups formed and developed community, how newcomers joined the community, and what made these new communities distinct from society around them. The interviews explored the attitude of the church toward suffering (a distinctive shared between the new churches and the early church movement). The new fellowships' development of leaders and its commitment to mission as a shared value within the congregation was also explored.

The responses to those interview questions, combined with observations from the first round of interviews, became the locus of the discussion in the chapter "Conversations Between Muslim Voices in Context and the Early Church Movement." A deeper analysis and reflection were embarked upon in the light of that discussion and various parallels (such as elements of worship, missional vision, etc.) between the new fellowships and the early church movement were identified. Key trends like isolationism and the adoption of cultural leadership models were also explored in this chapter. Finally, "Conclusions" outlines observations in the light of the research question. Suggestions were then made for either implementation or further exploration.

Limitations

This research will be limited to Christ-following fellowships consisting of mainly Muslim and Druze background disciples in the region of the Near East. For the sake of security, particularly for the new emerging churches studied, I have not specified the geographical location of the churches nor the identities of the interviewees. The term "Near East" is defined geographically in differing ways and therefore, due to its rather vague nature, became an ideal term for me to use for this thesis.[6] In the region there are 58 Palestinian refugee camps administered by U.N.R.W.A. Significant Shiite and Kurdish communities exist in a number of countries in the Near East, Druze are in at least four, while Sunni communities are the majority demographic in most of the countries in the area. It is hoped that readers will understand that these church expressions could exist in a large number of the nation states that make up today's Near East.

[6] Compare "Definition of THE NEAR EAST." Accessed July 30, 2017. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/the+Near+East to Catherine P. Foster, "Near East." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, 2011. Accessed July 30, 2017. http://www.ancient.eu/Near_East/.

A significant study of Islam was not attempted as this would be a dissertation in and of itself. Instead, some observations were made regarding the relationship between the local expression of Islam and adherents in the fellowships.

For ease of organization I have grouped each of the new emerging fellowships under the sections entitled Muslim Voices in Context I and II. This is not by any means an attempt to take a position in the debate surrounding the validity of the Druze religion's inclusion in the Muslim "umma" (*lit. "community"*).[7] In the aforementioned titles, I use the broadest sense of the word "Muslim" without judgment while clearly identifying each particular faith community in its respective section.

Research was limited to churches started within the broader evangelical mission movement among Muslims and Druze without reference to the various Catholic or Orthodox expressions of church found in the Near East. Historically, Muslims have "joined the church," officially changed religions, and become a part of the Orthodox or Catholic community to varying degrees. Though fascinating, this would again be another study (and is indeed explored in Kathryn Kraft's thesis)[8] and does not offer any new model of church. The same can be said of believers from Muslim and Druze backgrounds who have joined registered evangelical churches in the Near East.[9] These churches, often comprised mainly of families from traditional Christian background, generally have adopted a model of church practiced by evangelicals from Europe or North America. This study was limited to church expressions where the majority of adherents were from Muslim or Druze background.

In order to focus on the emerging fellowships among Muslims and Druze, time was not spent on examining historical and contemporary evangelical ecclesiology. Engaging the new small fellowships in dialogue with contemporary evangelical thinking on ecclesiology or with an historical Christian community that experienced similar antipathy from the wider society (like the Anabaptists in Europe) would be a worthy and fascinating study. However, this path is demanding of a separate dissertation and would not have allowed sufficient latitude for a full exploration of early church movement patterns of mission and church planting and their relevance for the new communities of faith in the Near East.

Along this line I did not give space to defining what constituted a "church" and evaluating if the different expressions (Mountain, City, Camp, or Village) matched this definition. Though a worthy avenue of exploration, I limited myself to the interviewees' designations. If the church planter or adherent described his or her community of faith as a church, then I followed their

[7] For a fuller treatment of this debate, see Nissim Dana, "Druze Identity, Religion – Tradition and Apostasy," accessed August 12, 2018. app.shaanan.ac.il/shanaton-15-14.pdf.
[8] Kraft, "*Community and Identity*," PhD diss.
[9] Ghiz, *Towards a Biblical Theology of Mission,* D. Min. diss.

lead. I was intent on discovering how they formed and grew community and the expression of mission linked with that community. There arose a somewhat confusing description of the City Church in the first round of interviews as Boutros, the leader, described it as "not a church" because they did not administer communion or baptize attendees. Boulos, also in the City Church, in the same round of interviews on occasion describes the home meetings as house churches, and Noor in the second round of interviews describes the Kurdish meeting as a church. In both of those contexts the sacraments were not administered.[10] This led me to abide by the interviewees' description and to focus rather on how they formed community. The City Church appeared to do that well.

As is outlined in the Methodology chapter, I was sensitive to the unavoidable reflexivity that occurred in the interviews. Issues such as power and honor most probably came into play as we conversed. Though I attempted to minimize this, to some extent it is, I believe, unpreventable and must be acknowledged here.

Another limitation was the selection of and access to those interviewed. I was able to arrange an interview with four church planters with whom I had had a previous acquaintance. These initial four directed me to other people to interview. This allowed me to then interview two church planters from the Camp Church network, two church planters from the City Church, one adherent from the Village Church network and three adherents from the Mountain Church. Because of the very sensitive context in which I was conducting the interviews, particularly the genuine potential physical risk to the interviewees, I did not have the freedom to interview people beyond the individuals introduced to me by the respective church planters. It was reported to me that either the church leaders felt it was too sensitive for me to interview different ones in the fellowship (other than the ones they recommended) or that the adherents themselves were uncomfortable about being interviewed. I also felt very hesitant about having frequent interviews for the same reason.

In addition, opinions of how the rest of society viewed the fellowships were only related to me by the interviewees themselves. No interviews were conducted with members of the surrounding community regarding these churches due to the sensitivity of the context that I was exploring. My principal concern was the potential negative reaction that could be caused by an outsider, particularly a non-Arab, asking questions about a relatively new group of people who were focused on studying the teachings of Christ or in some cases openly worshipping him. The five churches studied represented a spectrum of openness regarding their worship practices and each of the churches had their own unique missional posture toward the wider

[10] The reasons behind this are discussed in greater detail in sections Muslim Voices in Context I, The City Church Community and Muslim Voices in Context II, The City Church Community.

community; each shared a similar story of antagonism and rejection. I in no way wanted to exacerbate those attitudes.

In consequence I have related only how the church leaders and adherents themselves believed they were regarded by friends, neighbors, and the wider community. In a less-dangerous context it would have been fascinating to interview non-adherents and garner their perspective but, alas, my personal concern and the ethical standards that I adhered to in this research ("do no harm") prevented me from taking this step. This, then, is a limitation that has to be acknowledged. However, I felt that a limited voice was a far more favorable state of affairs than having no voice, which was the case previously.

Despite this research being limited to emerging Christ-centered fellowships from Muslim and Druze backgrounds in the Near East, I hope that there will be significant points of commonality with ministry among Muslims in other parts of the Muslim world. Naturally I can only make observations and draw conclusions regarding the contexts I studied and I am not able to generalize the results of this research for other regions. However, I expect that the suggested implications arising from this research will be helpful in other contexts.

Methodology

Methodological Considerations

The methodological and ethical considerations made while undertaking this project were many. As I was examining how adherents from Muslim (and Druze) backgrounds formed Christian or Christ-following communities and practiced mission, much of this research tended to contain material which would be highly controversial to the wider society and as such raised many ethical and methodological concerns. As it is regarded by many Muslims as shameful and indeed deviant behavior that there would be some among them who would wish to leave Islam, or, in the case of the Camp Church network, modify the teachings and praxis of Islam according to the teachings of Christ, great care had to be taken in data collection, the preservation of "untraceability," and the type of methodology employed. In this chapter I will review briefly the several methodologies considered and the reasons why they were not chosen, why Case Study research was preferred and the ethical issues raised by this study. Space will also be given to describing the selection process of both churches and interviewees, the implementation of the research methodology, and the coding of the interviews.

Methodology Chosen: Case Studies

As a means of best answering my research question, "How do the patterns of mission and church planting among the new emerging communities of faith in the Near East compare with those patterns in the early church during the apostolic period?" time was spent examining various qualitative research methodologies. After some time, I arrived at the conclusion that Case Study research was the approach best suited to this type of research. Berg describes this approach as:

> A method involving systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions.[1]

As my research question was in some senses both explanatory (what are these new communities doing?) and exploratory (why are they doing this?) I needed a research methodology that would allow me to ask both the "what" and the "why" of a contemporary set of events that would possibly develop and change over time. Although by the close of my research I had, in the main, only utilized two research tools, the semi-structured interview and the participant observer, I appreciated embarking on this inquiry with a flexible methodology.

[1] Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences,* 6th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2006), 283.

For a number of reasons I also believed it was essential to be able to examine each church expression within its own particular context. Firstly, I was able to identify four distinct and bounded groups that share the same experience of having recently formed as churches. However, I did not want to make the assumption that because all the churches had adherents predominantly from Muslim or Druze communities and were a result of evangelical mission activity that their praxis would be so similar as to allow me to examine broad trends with only minimal reflection on each specific context. Treating each church as a separate case study, albeit sharing areas of commonality with other new emerging churches, allowed me to explore much of how these faith communities expressed themselves. Secondly, by conducting multiple interviews per group I was able to gain a wider understanding of the participants' views on areas such as how the church was formed, how they joined the fellowship, what they do in church and why. Using this methodology, I was able to conduct "within-case analysis" (where each case and its respective findings and themes are described in detail) followed by a "cross-case analysis" (where themes are examined across the cases).[2] I found this valuable for proposing possible broader relevance for other contexts while still retaining my primary responsibility to understand each individual case as much as was possible.

Thirdly, I considered this methodology an effective means of gathering the personal observations and life experiences of each individual participant within their context.[3] It was critical to me that the different interviewees were allowed to have a voice and that this would be reflected clearly in the relevant chapters. All sought to express their faith convictions, by word and deed, in difficult, suspicious, and often antagonistic contexts. Several communicated that they considered their life or the lives of others in their church to be at risk because of these convictions. Engaging each of the churches as case studies allowed me the flexibility to have their voices be heard while still collecting data on praxis and exploring wider possible themes.

The weaknesses of Case Study research were considered. Sarantakos cautions that this approach may only produce results that are case specific which cannot be replicated and leave no room for "inductive generalizations."[4] On the other hand, Yin observes that, although each context has its own particularity, it is possible to draw out themes and issues relevant to other similar situations.[5] Bell appears to agree with Yin, adding that the real value of a case study lies in the degree to which the particulars of the study are relevant to someone in a similar situation. She sees relevance as defined by the extent that an individual or group could identify with the case and as a result be helped in their own decision-making.[6] Bassey, in the same

[2] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design,* 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), 101.
[3] Sotirios Sarantakos, *Social Research,* 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 216.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods,* 5th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013), 133-174.
[6] Judith Bell, *Doing Your Research Project,* 4th ed. (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), 11.

camp, uses the term "relatability" as he assesses a case study's value.[7] Flyvbjerg also sees the use of case studies as giving the ability to critique general propositions, adding critical reflexivity in to the research process. Citing Popper's famous example that the proposition that "all swans are white" is refuted by observing just one black swan, Flyvbjerg believes that research through case studies can refine generalizations and provoke further research theory development. He writes:

> The case study is well suited for identifying 'black swans' because of its in-depth approach: what appears to be 'white' often turns out on closer examination to be 'black.'[8]

Another common critique of the use of case studies as a research tool centers around the lack of objectivity on the part of the researcher which can result in a bias in the gathering and evaluation of results. Yin rightly points out that this is a problem faced in a number of research methodologies and points to good methodology and planning as a means of mitigating bias in data collection and analysis.[9] In the light of this critique it may be of some value to give a brief summary of my own methodology that is reported in detail in various chapters in the thesis. I fully acknowledged in the section entitled "Limitations" that I do not come to this research as a neutral party but rather have experience and preexisting relationships with some of the interviewees; this has most probably colored my thinking. I have also acknowledged the issues of reflexivity later in this methodology section. However, to reduce the effect of bias, I conducted the interviews as semi-structured and open-ended, allowing the interviewees to add as much material as they desired (which they did!) rather than just gathering theory-specific data. As outlined below, my questions were vetted by four research advisors and revised after a trial pilot interview. My research was primarily exploratory rather than explanatory, and considerable space was given to allowing the interviewees to speak, particularly in the chapter "Muslim Voices in Context I." Data from the first round of interviews were coded descriptively only rather than as a means of testing a theory, and categories and themes were ascertained almost exclusively by frequency. Assertions were kept to a minimum and this research provided description, questions for exploration, and suggestions rather than a general theory.

Interestingly, Flyvbjerg answers the criticism of bias by affirming that there is this possibility in Case Study research but no more than in other research methodologies (e.g. how a survey is written and to whom it is given). He asserts instead that a researcher using Case Study methodology, rather than maintaining a bias may well change his or her assumptions and

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[7] Michael Bassey, "Pedagogic Research: On the Relative Merits of the Search for Generalisation and Study of Single Events," *Oxford Review of Education* 7, no. 1 (1981): 73-93.
[8] Bent Flyvbjerg, "Five Misunderstandings about Case-Study Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (2006): 230.
[9] Yin, *Case Study Research,* 14-15.

preconceptions because the methodology leads the researcher to engage in-depth with the data. He states:

> According to Campbell, Ragin, Geertz, Wieviorka, Flyvbjerg, and others, researchers who have conducted intensive, in-depth case studies typically report that their preconceived views, assumptions, concepts, and hypotheses were wrong and that the case material has compelled them to revise their hypotheses on essential points.[10]

This certainly aligns with my personal experience as I embarked on my research. In addition to discovering what the different communities were doing with respect to mission and community formation, my preconceived notions about their use of the Christian Scriptures (to take one example) were tested and refuted.

Another critique of Case Study research is the comparatively lengthy amount of time required to conduct it and that it produces so much information that it becomes almost unreadable. Yin dismisses this criticism by stating that although a long and close connection with the case being researched may be true with ethnographies (see below) this is not necessarily true of case studies. There has been research in the past (he cites the 1991 research of Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg) which has warranted this critique but Yin believes that this methodology, with good design, can be flexible in regards to length, the use of narrative, participant observation, etc. Valuable, usable data can be generated through various forms of enquiry.[11]

Despite the potential weaknesses outlined above, I found the strengths of the Case Study approach quite persuasive in my assessment of this methodology's suitability for my field research.[12] After review I felt that this methodology was the most suitable for conducting in-depth holistic research[13] and for the gathering of personal observations and life experiences of the participants within their contexts.[14] I also became convinced this methodology was highly flexible and robust in its ability to utilize various sources and methods.[15]

Considerable time was spent examining other research methods before I finally decided on the Case Study research methodology. This was a very beneficial exercise and the arguments for and against each methodology were explored. Although each research methodology had a helpful approach to gathering and analyzing data, none were considered as suitable for my research as

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[10] Flyvbjerg, "*Five Misunderstandings*," 238.
[11] Yin, *Case Study Research,* 14-15.
[12] For further critique on the potential pitfalls in Case Study research, see Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 7-9, 12; Michael Bassey, *Case Study Research in Educational Settings* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 30-36; Yin, *Case Study Research*, 20.
[13] Sarantakos, *Social Research*, 216.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid. I was a participant observer in at least two of the groups. I considered this a valuable source of data collection in addition to the interviews. See Yin, *Case Study Research,* 106.

undertaking a collective case study. For brevity's sake, only the reasons for rejection are outlined in the following.

Conducting the research as an ethnography was considered and, even though much of the research could have been gathered and examined using this methodology, I eventually moved away from using it as a primary research tool. This was for the most part due to my limited contact with the communities themselves. My one-on-one (or one-on-two) interviews were conducted mainly with church leaders and adherents and although I was able to be a participant observer at two of the churches it was impossible for me to attend any of the meetings with the Village or Camp Church networks. Ideally in undertaking an ethnography the researcher is able to stay with the community for a period of time, observing and recording, and has an ongoing long-term involvement with the group being researched. To ensure the safety of the participants, I was unable to do this. I relied heavily therefore on the interview process as my main tool for gathering information. Another significant factor was that the interviewees in my research were from four differing religious backgrounds rather than one single ethno-religious group.[16] All of the above factors combined to influence my decision in choosing Case Study methodology.

A phenomenological approach was also examined but as the research investigates different practices among different fellowships rather than researching a shared phenomenon among all participants, this methodology was also discarded.[17] The aspect of time was also a factor (there was a gap of two to four years between interviews) and I felt that approaching the churches as case studies allowed me to observe and record changes over that time period rather than just focusing on one shared phenomenon.

As the strengths and weaknesses of the narrative research methodology were examined, it too was rejected. The research performed in the Near East explored the collective praxis of different groups and fellowships rather than recording and analyzing individual or individuals' personal experiences. It was felt that personal narratives would be insufficient in giving a broader picture of the whole group.[18] The interviews focused instead on the interviewees' reflections on and experiences with a specific faith community. It was felt also that, as the narrative research method has the potential to require multiple interviews with the same subject, this may have raised security and cultural issues.[19]

[16] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 68.
[17] Mariwilda Padilla-Diaz, "Phenomenology in Educational Qualitative Research: Philosophy as Science or Philosophical Science?" *International Journal of Educational Excellence* 1, no. 2 (2015): 101-110.
[18] Bell, *Doing Your Research*, 21.
[19] Ibid., 23.

Grounded Theory was also considered but eventually was laid aside as an option for two main reasons.[20] Firstly, this study conducted just over 20 semi-structured interviews but, as grounded theory may require up to 60 interviews to saturate the model, it was considered for security reasons to be ill-advised.[21] Secondly, as I personally had an ongoing involvement in church planting among Muslim people, I considered it difficult for me to examine the data derived from the interviews without an already existing hypothesis. There existed the danger of gleaning only hypothesis-relevant facts.[22]

At the end of this process I arrived at a place of considerable conviction that the Case Study research methodology was the best suited as the form of inquiry. I was able to undertake a collective case study over multiple sites with interviews and observations stretching over a number of years. Examining the churches as case studies allowed me the flexibility to gather data, the possibility to compare themes between cases, and the opportunity to examine in depth certain aspects of each faith community.

Ethical Reflections

Research design

Time was spent reflecting on the potential ethical concerns that this research could evoke. Sullivan raises the obvious concern of seeking to conduct, analyze, and report research in an honest and accurate manner. Apart from the clearly fraudulent case of suppressing facts that disagree with a desired outcome or measuring results in a certain way to achieve the same, Sullivan also warns of the far more subtle danger of designing research that generates deceptive results.[23]

As the bulk of the research was based on semi-structured, open-ended interviews, care had to be taken in crafting the initial interview questions themselves so that they elicited facts of actual practice. An initial theory was being tested regarding the extent to which the New Testament influenced a group's missional and community praxis; however, the structured but open-ended format of the interviews allowed for significant latitude on the part of the interviewee. A few surprising discoveries, particularly in the areas of identity and community, came to light and will be discussed in later chapters.

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[20] Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory,* 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2008), 1-20.
[21] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 89.
[22] Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 2.
[23] Thomas J. Sullivan, *Methods of Social Research* (Orlando: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001), 18.

Potential harm

Research, as Silverman rightly points out, is not just a matter of correct methodology and proper analysis. He challenges the researcher to examine his or her motives for undertaking the study, consider the value added, if any, to society and understand the desire the researcher possesses to help or protect the research subjects.[24] Sullivan adds his belief that most researchers would at least hold to a core conviction of "do no harm."[25] However, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison reflect on the complexity of ethical research, arguing that even the statement of "do no harm" is not always so straightforward.[26] They contend that the "distinction between ethical and unethical behavior is not dichotomous," but rather "a continuum that ranges from the clearly ethical to the clearly unethical."[27] Ethical principles therefore must be discerned according to the context of the research in the light of other values of concern as the research is being conducted. They support implementing what they call a "costs/benefits ratio"[28] where the benefits (to society and the participants) are weighed against the potential costs (to the same participants). May, on the other hand, questions whether a cost/benefits ratio reduces everything to a utilitarian emphasis on results and calls for an examining of principles and motives in addition to the perceived benefits.[29]

Confidentiality and privacy

Foundational ethics for all social research, in Sarantakos' opinion, are the right to privacy and the right to confidentiality. He defines this as the interviewees' right to disclose or withhold any information regarding their private lives or sensitive issues they wish not to discuss. Practically, this would mean that interviewees have a right to decline answering any question they dislike and a right to expect their contributions not to be shared with others without their consent.[30] Sullivan agrees, adding that as participants are volunteers, they obviously have the right to withdraw at any point from the study as well as the right to maintain control of their personal information.[31] Bell would advocate for the common practice of fully informing the interviewees of the research and obtaining their consent verbally or with a consent form. She adds that this

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[24] David Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction,* 3rd ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 315-335.

[25] Sullivan, *Methods of Social Research*, 18.

[26] Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 61. The authors use the terms "absolutist" and "relativist" ethics. They argue that an absolutist ethical position which asserts that causing human suffering is never justified would terminate much of medical and psychological research despite the possible good of such research to the wider society.

[27] Ibid., 58.

[28] Ibid., 52.

[29] William May, "Doing Ethics: The Bearing of Ethical Theories on Fieldwork," *Social Problems* 27, no. 3 (1980): 358-370.

[30] Sarantakos, *Social Research*, 18.

[31] Sullivan, *Methods of Social Research*, 18.

may involve allowing the participants to see the research before it is published.[32] Sullivan, on the other hand, asks if participants really do need to know everything about the research project or whether sufficient information for an informed decision is all that is needed.[33]

This debate informed and framed my conduct and my research as the project was undertaken. Obviously the principle of "do no harm" needed to override all other concerns as this study was being conducted, particularly as I was engaging with individuals and families who have chosen to exercise their freedom of conscience regarding faith beliefs in societies where these decisions can be seen as anything from deviant to blasphemous. The consequences can range from strained family relationships and ostracism, to abduction of children, physical harm and, on occasion, death.[34] As will be discussed later in more detail, the identity of research participants remains a secret.[35] This was achieved through the use of pseudonyms throughout the study. A corresponding master list of actual names has been kept separately for validation and to reflect integrity in the research, as Berg suggests.[36] Place names were also redacted. Care was also taken to conduct the research inconspicuously and informally and, in consequence, government officials were not notified. Informed consent was obtained verbally from each participant but was recorded with the rest of the interview. The study and its purpose were explained to each participant in some detail; however, the identity of other interviewees was not revealed. Despite the concerns for security and anonymity, the participants were eager to share their stories and opinions, often going into great detail about certain issues. Though they were given the option to not answer if any question made them uncomfortable, all participants answered every question.

Case Study Design and Implementation

I embarked on my research seeking to compare the patterns of mission and church planting among the new emerging communities of faith in the Near East with those patterns in the early church during the apostolic period. After deciding on the Case Study methodology as a suitable vehicle for research, and opting to conduct semi-structured, open-ended interviews as a primary method of data collection, I then had to develop the interview questions and choose the interviewees.

The primary information that I wished to glean from the interviews could be summarized in three main areas. Firstly, I wanted to ascertain what was the contemporary practice of church

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[32] Bell, *Doing Your Research*, 44-45. Sullivan does raise some concerns regarding informed consent, in particular with signed consent forms, where formal contracts have caused subjects to be less open in their responses. See Sullivan, *Methods of Social Research*, 61. This is relevant for my particular context, where people have security concerns and prefer to share informally. Signing papers does convey more of a sense that the interview is official.
[33] Sullivan, *Methods of Social Research*, 61.
[34] Phil Parshall, *Understanding Muslim Teachings and Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 107-108.
[35] Sullivan, *Methods of Social Research*, 64. Sullivan uses the term "untraceability" rather than "anonymity."
[36] Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods,* 79-81.

congregations consisting of predominantly Muslim and Druze background adherents, particularly in the areas of mission and church planting. Secondly, I wished to uncover the reasons for and influences behind this current praxis. Thirdly, I also wanted to explore to what extent, if any, had their understanding of early church practice (in mission and church planting) influenced what they did and why they did it.

I felt it was important to not only look at the way that these communities formed and functioned but also how they expressed their faith convictions to the wider society. Each of these churches was a relatively recent result of a missional effort. These "church planters" believed that sharing with others their convictions regarding the person and life of Jesus Christ, instructing others in his teachings and guiding interested people into identifying as his followers were all part of a missional mandate found in the Christian Scriptures. I was very interested to know if this missional conviction held by the church planters was passed on as a conviction that the new adherents should also hold and, if so, if it was reflected in their praxis. In other words, were the new fellowship members merely the object of a missional enterprise or were they encouraged to be the subject also. It is not unreasonable to assume that if this missional conviction was embraced by the majority of the new adherents then the possibility for growth was greatly enhanced. This in turn would be an important contributing factor to the new fellowship's viability as a community with potential longevity and societal impact.[37] In addition, it appeared that this was also a distinguishing feature of the early church movement. As Bosch states:

> The "ordinary" members of the first Christian communities cannot appropriate the term "disciple" to themselves unless they are also willing to be enlisted in Jesus' fellowship of service to the world.[38]

Although an exploration of the early church movement does not occur in this thesis until after the first round of interviews, previous readings had informed my thinking and I was very interested to discover if there were parallels in this missional vision between the ancient and modern contexts.

Case Study Design

Developing the questions

After initially formulating the interview questions, I then met with my field supervisor to review what I had prepared. Together we did an extensive revision of the questions, with the goal of making them as neutral (as opposed to leading) as possible. Further input was solicited from another researcher who also made helpful suggestions to aid in clarity. A pilot interview with an

[37] This is not to suggest, however, that this is the only factor.

[38] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 39.

accomplished Levantine church planter was then conducted. The goal of this interview was to field-test the questions and solicit feedback from the church planter as to the clarity and suitability of the questions. We decided that the most suitable candidate for field testing the interview questions was the Reverend Fouad Kahwagi. Reverend Kahwagi has had extensive church planting experience both in the Middle East and in Cyprus.

Pilot interview

I was able to conduct a pilot interview with Reverend Kahwagi in a relaxed and informal setting. I found it very helpful to go through the interview allowing Pastor Fouad to critique the interview questions as he saw fit. He raised important issues regarding official recognition by the government when discussing issues of integration and identity, highlighting an area that was not initially intended to be explored in the interview.[39] This pattern, perhaps not wholly unexpected, was repeated in many of the subsequent interviews conducted. An additional question exploring the congregants' self-description was added. Other questions were also modified to varying degrees to bring further clarity as a result of the pilot interview.

Implementation

Choosing the churches

Rather than interviewing individuals about their own personal journeys, the goal of this research was to examine new communities as they emerged and developed around faith convictions in Christ. This was done through the eyes of the twelve different individuals that were interviewed. However, before choosing the individuals, the types of communities to be examined needed to be identified. There were certain criteria that I believed would afford enough similarity and diversity to undertake a valuable study.

Firstly, the churches needed to have been constituted of adherents predominantly from non-Christian religious and cultural Middle Eastern backgrounds. Secondly, the churches needed to have been established relatively recently in comparison with the evangelical community. I found this helpful as I discussed with first-generation Christians why and how they did things in a certain way. Thirdly, though the churches needed to be similar in some aspects (particularly in the areas of background and age), they also needed to be diverse in their approach to group

[39] Issam Saliba, "Lebanon: Constitutional Law and the Political Rights of Religious Communities," April 30, 2012, https://www.loc.gov/law/help/lebanon-constitutional-law.php#individual. In the Lebanese confessional political system, each citizen is identified by his religious group and officially recorded in that manner. The numbers of different religious groups are reflected in parliament by the number of seats representing each group. Hence, questions of people's religious affiliation is, on one level, a distinctly political issue. As Muslims embrace a faith commitment to Christ, questions of whether they should leave their existing Muslim community and join a Christian community can become very complex.

formation, particularly in the areas of religion and culture as it affected their contemporary faith expression. With these criteria in mind, four churches or house church networks were chosen.

The Camp Church Network

- A network of house churches that is seeking to remain culturally and religiously within the framework of Islam. They have their own established leadership and are exclusively Sunni Muslim.

The City Church

- An outreach center with the original intention of being a "halfway house" where believers from Muslim background (BMB) could gather for teaching and fellowship as they were being integrated into local evangelical churches. It is headed up by a Lebanese evangelical who has a religious and cultural background rooted in the Christian community. A number of house groups were attached to this center and eventually a Kurdish language congregation emerged. This fellowship has local leadership and its adherents are predominantly from a Sunni Muslim background. The underlying assumption of the center is that BMBs will leave their religion and many aspects of their culture and be absorbed into the evangelical community.

The Mountain Church

- A single congregation, locally led, in a rural area with several mid-week home groups in outlying regions. The adherents are mainly, but not exclusively, from the Druze community, and others from Christian, Sunni, and Shiite communities also regularly attend. They are seeking to maintain the Druze social structure with most of its values and traditions while disassociating themselves from an overt connection with the Druze religion. Between the first and second round of interviews this congregation split due to a conflict between two of the leaders, which led to a second congregation, exclusively from Druze background, forming on another mountain.

The Village Church Network

- A network of house churches in a rural setting. It is locally led and in the first round of interviews the house churches were attended by adherents from the Shiite community. The house churches met exclusively in family gatherings. By the second round of interviews a network of house churches attended by families from the Sunni community had emerged. The networks do not mix. Both networks are seeking to maintain either Sunni or Shiite social structure, most of the values and traditions

of their host cultures, and at the same time remain integrated in the surrounding society while disassociating themselves from an overt connection with Islam.

Choosing the interviewees

To begin the interviewee selection process, I approached either the leader of the congregation or network or, in the case of the Camp Church network, the leader of the missionary team in relationship with the network leadership. After explaining the purpose of the study and conducting the first interview with each leader, I then requested introductions to other congregants whom I could interview. I then went on to conduct one or two interviews with those to whom I was introduced by the church leader or missionary. The interviewees are listed below:

Round 1 interviews

Pseudonym	*Community Background*	*Gender*	*Age*	*Type of Interview*	*Church*
Dexter	Westerner	male	40-50	church planter	Camp
Mohammed	Palestinian Sunni	male	30-40	church planter	Camp
Isa	Palestinian Sunni	male	30-40	church planter	Camp
Boutros	Levantine Evangelical	male	30-40	church planter	City
Boulos	Levantine Catholic	male	30-40	church planter	City
Raed	Levantine Druze	male	50-60	church planter	Mountain
Rashid	Levantine Druze	male	50-60	adherent	Mountain
Hashem	Levantine Shiite	male	30-40	adherent	Mountain
Aisha	Levantine Shiite	female	20-30	adherent	Mountain
Reem	Levantine Shiite	female	20-30	adherent	Village
Mahboub	Levantine Shiite	male	40-50	church planter	Village

Round 2 interviews

Pseudonym	*Community Background*	*Gender*	*Age*	*Type of Interview*	*Church*
Mohammed	Palestinian Sunni	male	30-40	church planter	Camp
Isa	Palestinian Sunni	male	30-40	church planter	Camp
Boutros	Levantine Evangelical	male	30-40	church planter	City
Noor	Kurdish Sunni	male	30-40	church planter	City
Raed	Levantine Druze	male	50-60	church planter	Mountain 1
Rashid	Levantine Druze	male	50-60	church planter	Mountain 2
Mahboub	Levantine Shiite	male	40-50	church planter	Village

I could appreciate the possible bias of only interviewing those to whom the church leader or missionary introduced me, but given the circumstances I believed I had little choice. I was dealing with faith communities that felt under threat because of their beliefs and were not open to sit down with a stranger, even if he identified himself as a fellow believer, and answer questions about their personal faith. I needed those introductions to conduct the interviews on some foundation of trust. Interestingly, despite the social and cultural distance, almost all the interviewees quickly became relaxed, frank, and enthusiastic about sharing their story and their opinions.

The interview process

The eleven first-round interviews were conducted in places of the interviewees' choosing. None of them took place in private homes but rather offices and, on a couple of occasions, in a restaurant. The interviewees were all initially asked identical questions but obviously, due to the open-ended nature of the interview, follow-up exploratory questions were also asked. The interviews were all recorded but the interviewees were assured that the recordings would remain with me and me alone as the researcher. Informed verbal consent was obtained for

every interview and is at the beginning of each recording. The first round of interviews was conducted over a period of time dating from December 2011 to January 2013. The majority of interviews were given in late 2012.

The first round of Interviews was undertaken with the intent to explore the praxis of mission and church planting found in the new emerging churches and the extent to which the New Testament informed their practice. If the New Testament was not the primary influence, then the first round of interviews was conducted with the hope that other influences would be revealed. In addition, attention was given to the possibility of bringing to light other issues important to the interviewees.

After completing the first round of interviews, the transcripts were read and re-read multiple times in an effort to elicit broad themes and also highlight specific issues. I will discuss how I coded the interviews below, but for now it is enough to say that the readings revealed that there were overarching themes that appeared to be common among the communities. Specifically they revealed that even though the New Testament was important in giving inspiration to and even identifying the need for mission, it did not inform practice. Rather the surrounding culture as well as the ecclesial background and methodological convictions of the church planter were the main influences on practice. Common in each community were themes surrounding identity or new identity and the desire for community.

In turn the issues of mission and church planting patterns were used as a foundation for a survey of New Testament scholarship regarding early church practice in those areas. Similarly, the areas of identity and community formation and practice in the early churches were also explored. The findings from that survey then became the basis for the questions asked in the second round of interviews.

The process for the second round of interviews was very similar to that of the first round. All the interviews were recorded, conducted in either English or Arabic (or both) according to the comfort of the interviewee, and took place in a home, a restaurant, and several offices. The seven people interviewed were, with the exception of one, church leaders that had participated in the first round of interviews. Noor, who represented a group of Kurdish speakers that emerged as a new expression of the City Church, was the only interviewee not interviewed in round one. All second round interviews were conducted in 2015.

Reflexivity

As Jackson states: “Fieldwork involving other people is one of the most intensively personal kinds of scholarly research I know. Everything about the fieldworker influences the information

collected."[40] The question, therefore, must also be asked regarding the possible perceptions that interviewees had regarding me and how my presence may have affected the interview.

I am a middle-aged, Western, evangelical missionary (53 at the time of the first round of interviews) and have lived in the Middle East since 1982. I was known personally to most of the interviewees (Dexter, Boulos, Boutros, Noor, Raed, Rashid, and Mahboub) to some degree and I was introduced to the others (Mohammed, Isa, Hashem, Aisha, and Reem) by either their respective church leader or a trusted mutual friend. I would possibly be regarded by the interviewees as an "elder" type figure in the local evangelical community and, although only Boulos, Boutros, and Noor regard themselves as part of that local community, I believe a certain trust and acceptance was afforded me by the remainder of the interviewees as being a mature adherent of a shared faith. This is, of course, only my perception as no questions were directly asked regarding how they viewed me, and in all probability no meaningful answer would have been obtained if such questions had been asked.

That being said, I did sense a great deal of trust in nearly all of the interviews that I conducted. The only exception to this was the interview with Reem, a young Shiite lady from the Village Church. Although I interviewed her in Arabic with an older single female missionary present, whom Reem trusted, she appeared very reserved, perhaps even a little intimidated, during our meeting. All the other interviewees enthusiastically shared their stories, perceptions and experiences. In fact, as I communicated that this research (and their input) would be part of a study for a major European university, they appeared to tackle each question with serious thought and several expressed their appreciation in being asked to be a part of what they considered a very important piece of research. Having said that, however, and perhaps due to a number of factors including my age and perceived standing in the evangelical community, it cannot be ruled out that on occasion the "best face" was put on some of the responses to the interview questions. As I am not an Arab, nor from a Muslim community, and not a member of any of the churches studied, I am therefore an "outsider" to many aspects of their lives (though I was not made to feel that way) and as such perhaps was given on occasion answers that were less critical than what would have been given to a fellow member of their church. However, this is to be expected and although this was taken into account in my analysis, in the end I sought to remain true to their "voices."

From my side I was able to express my gratitude for their willingness to be a part of this research, a deep interest in their personal story and opinions, and a strong commitment to represent their feedback with integrity while maintaining their anonymity. I found myself growing in respect and admiration toward the interviewees as the research process progressed and as more of their personal journeys was revealed. It became obvious early in the process

[40] Bruce Jackson, *Fieldwork* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 16.

that I was being allowed a glimpse into not only the adherents' praxis but also the values, attitudes, and beliefs that led them to live as they live and do as they do. I felt deeply privileged to be permitted this access, and as they related their stories I found my initial interest growing in intensity with each interview. I hope, indeed I suspect, that my sense of respect, admiration, fascination, and privilege was conveyed to the interviewees during the interviews.

Coding

The data collected from the two rounds of interviews were approached in different ways. The first round of questions was exploratory, seeking to discover the interviewees' recollection of how the fellowships began, a description of their current worship praxis, and how they approached Christian mission.[41] I considered it important to establish each church's unique narrative to provide context for the findings of the interview. However, as someone who has been involved to varying degrees in church planting among Muslim peoples for the past three decades, this experience, for better or worse, "colored my lens." Despite my best efforts to remain objective as I coded, this must be taken into account.

The data collected from the eleven people interviewed in the first round of interviews were then analyzed by me alone with the aim of identifying major common themes. Although I did begin the interview process with a question regarding the influence of the New Testament on the praxis of mission and community formation, I quickly ascertained (as one would expect) that other significant issues were coming to light. With this in mind, I endeavored, in addition to my New Testament question, to glean a description of each faith community, something of how it functioned and why, as well as identifying the major issues that each fellowship was facing. These issues became the questions that fueled the conversation with the early church movement in the apostolic period. Only one form of coding (Descriptive) was applied.[42]
After the simple Descriptive coding the major categories that emerged were:

- How the fellowship began (the initial steps of mission and community formation).
- How the fellowship is structured and functions.
- How the fellowship does mission.
- The fellowship's worship praxis.
- The major influences that contributed to the above.

[41] See Appendix for list of questions.

[42] A common method of coding in "Open" or "Initial" coding. See Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2013), 74.

There were a number of sub-categories under each of the headings, many of them context-specific to a particular fellowship. From these categories, themes common to all four (later five) faith communities were proposed. These were:

- Worship forms and rituals are borrowed rather than created.
- Community formation coalesces around a structure borrowed from society.
- Mission is a concept owned and practiced by the majority of adherents.
- Each fellowship was heavily influenced in its mission and worship praxis by the church planter, how the adherents understood themselves in the light of their new faith convictions, and how society regarded them in the light of the same.

These common themes (and indeed the underlying categories) formed the basis for the questions asked of the early church movement. These questions, I determined, were often implicit to the text of the interviews.

The second round of interviews, using a series of questions generated by the ongoing conversation,[43] were then analyzed using three different types of coding. Firstly, I again repeated the process of using an initial Descriptive coding to examine the data from the seven people interviewed in the second round. The data were then re-coded using a Structural[44] coding, asking the question: "In the mind of the interviewee, what is successful mission and community and how does he or she describe mission and/or community failure?" The criteria for what determined success or failure was established by the opinions of the interviewees themselves, i.e. if the interviewee called it a success it was coded as a success and vice versa. The material was then re-coded to investigate values, attitudes, and beliefs by utilizing Values coding.[45] I used the Values coding method in an effort to explore some of the interviewees' values, particularly but not exclusively cultural values, and also to further understand the interpersonal experiences of the interviewees in their church communities. Each of the codings produced numerous categories and sub-categories (too many to list here) but common themes were established from the categories.
These were:

- The church's self-description and place in society.
- The patterns of mission.
    - Relational witness

[43] See Appendix for list of questions.
[44] Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009), 66-70; E. Namey, G. Guest, L. Thairu, and L. Johnson, "Data Reduction Techniques for Large Qualitative Data Sets," in *Handbook for Team-Based Qualitative Research*, eds. Greg Guest and Kathleen M. MacQueen (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2008).
[45] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual,* 89-90.

    - Changed lives (as a foundation for witness)
    - Missional vision embraced by the majority of attendees
    - Mission as an expression of self-understanding
    - Willingness to suffer
- The shape of community.
    - Establishing boundaries to define community
    - A called community

The different themes are explained in detail in the chapter entitled Muslim Voices in Context II. Findings from those interviews were then put in conversation with the findings of the early church movement section. This then constitutes the last analysis section.

Summary

This section describes the journey from examining and choosing a research methodology while also considering the ethical implications through to choosing the churches to be examined, conducting the interviews, and analyzing the raw data gathered. The area of reflexivity was also considered. Finding the right methodology, choosing the churches, etc., was critical in allowing the Muslim voices in context to truly speak and gave a framework to meaningfully engage in conversation with the early church voices.

Muslim Voices in Context I

A Conversation with Four Emerging Fellowships of Non-Christian Background Believers

Introduction

This section gives a voice to the new churches now appearing in the Near East. This is a highly descriptive section reflecting the opinions of the interviewees with little critique. To create a stage for the interviewees to express themselves, I conducted the interviews seeking to answer three basic and somewhat descriptive questions. They were:

- How did these non-Christian background fellowships begin?
- At the time of the interview, how did these Christ-followers practice their faith and worship in their particular non-Christian context?
- Why did they choose to express their worship and witness in this particular way?

In addition, I was curious to discover the impact that their understanding of the New Testament and the expressions of church found in the same had on their praxis and/or the motivations behind what they did. As communities that highly esteem the New Testament as a sacred text, authoritative in life and faith, one would expect its influence to be significant (which it was) and easy to specify (which it was not). The questions asked can be found in the appendices.

What emerged from these interviews was, unsurprisingly, the central role of the church planter/leader in both the initial establishment of the fellowship and its continued expression. His background (cultural, religious, and ecclesial) and convictions were significant factors in each fellowship examined. Naturally the cultural and religious context from which the new fellowships emerged also had an important impact on that particular fellowship's expression.

Another major area of great interest and deserving of further examination was the challenging journey undertaken by each of the fellowships as they wrestled with their own new self-description. Who were they now that they had embraced the faith claims of Christ, claims which have traditionally been the sole purview of another religious community/communities? A significant part of this new journey were also the questions centered on group formation: "who are we to each other" and "how do we express our worship and witness to the wider community that surrounds us." The interviews revealed how each fellowship sought to answer those questions. These issues also became formative in helping to guide the inquiry into how the early church movement practiced their faith in their context while also seeking to answer some of these fundamental questions.

The following interviews are mostly with the original church planter and one or two other people in the congregation. They represent a spectrum of fellowships from those that have chosen to embrace Christianity as well as the faith claims of Christ and are seeking to assimilate into the evangelical[1] community, all the way to those that are seeking to remain within the religion of Islam as a Christ-following expression. Although I have reported the results under uniform headings, the subheadings do vary from church to church in a reflection of the uniqueness of each context.

The Mountain Church

Introduction

The following description summarizes the interviews that the author conducted with four attendees of the Mountain Church. Raed is a well-educated, Westernized, middle-aged man who started and now leads the Mountain Church. He was born in the Near East as a Druze,[2] accepted the faith claims of Christ while abroad, and describes himself as a "Druze believer in Christ." Rashid is a middle-aged professional who also accepted the faith claims of Christ while abroad. Similarly to Raed, he describes himself as "a Druze believing in Jesus Christ" and has assumed a leadership role in the church. Hashem and Aisha, a younger couple in their late twenties to early thirties, are regular attendees of the fellowship. They were both born Shiite and originate from a country other than where the Mountain Church gathers. They accepted the faith claims of Christ while in their home country.

This section addresses the findings gleaned in the first round of interviews conducted with Mountain Church adherents in 2011 and 2012. It outlines the beginnings and development of the fellowship as well as the community life and missional engagement with the wider community at the time of the interviews. It also describes what appears to be the major influences that led to their community and missional praxis.

Beginnings

- General overview:

The church in the mountains grew out of a language and education center that began in 1997. There were no other established evangelical churches in the immediate area (certainly not in

[1] Evangelicals in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq are officially recognized by those respective governments as a legitimate sect (Injiliyya) within the Christian community. The term "Injiliyya" is most often used synonymously with the term "Protestant." See Habib Badr, "The Protestant Evangelical Community in the Middle East: Impact on Cultural and Societal Developments," *International Review of Mission* 89, no. 352 (2000): 66.

[2] The Druze movement arose out of the Ismai'ili expression of Shia Islam in 1017 AD. Beginning in Cairo during the reign of the sixth Fatimid caliph, Al Hakim bi-Amr Allah, the movement soon spread to Mount Lebanon and the anti-Lebanon ranges, parts of northern and southern Syria (including Damascus) and parts of northern Palestine (which today is Israel).

the same village) at that time and the church planter had moved to the district with his family a year previously with the intention of beginning a church. They started the center and, relatively quickly, a small Bible study started with some of the center's staff who, after some time of interaction, had decided to embrace the faith claims of Christ and become followers of his teachings. At that time all the attendees of this small study, between 13 to 16 people, were from the Druze community and met every day at the center for prayer and regular weekly Bible study. Also around this time several vocational Christian missionaries/ministers, both foreign and non-Druze locals, joined the center and also joined the Bible study group. Then a Friday night meeting, which quickly was rescheduled to Sunday mornings, began along similar lines and had around 25 to 30 people regularly attending. Some of those attending were friends or relatives of the center employees who were added to the original group**,** and services were conducted in the center. This gathering continued at this size until 2004. From 2004 the fellowship experienced a growth in numbers as new people started visiting the gatherings, not only through personal invitations from adherents but also as the reputation of the group grew in the community and people came to visit out of curiosity. The fellowship expanded to around 50 to 60 regular attendees, mainly but not exclusively from the Druze community, until 2006.

In 2006 a violent conflict between two nations put a stop to all the programs operating out of the center and the church planter left with his family to a foreign country. After an absence of a year the church planter and his family returned to the area. It was at that time, with no existing programs operating out of the center, that a greater emphasis was placed on relationships within the fellowship. 2008 and 2009 were years when the church planter and other leaders concentrated on building unity as they taught on spiritual gifts and mutual submission. Concurrently the families within the church shared their faith beliefs with their wider clans more consistently and more were added to the fellowship. In 2012 the number of regular attendees of the Mountain Church was around 100 people, with the majority being from the Druze community.

- Personal testimony to family, clan, and close friends:

The church planter, having returned to his village after many years abroad**,** had continued his clear personal testimony regarding his changed faith beliefs that he had maintained while in the other country. From his interview it would appear that the main initial discourse on faith and religion was with his wider family. Because of the close ties that the Druze diaspora has with the home country, his reputation of having changed his religion preceded him**,** which initially caused some of his family to question his loyalties. However, part of Raed's presentation to his family was that he was not leaving the Druze community, nor changing his official registration with the government but was following the teachings of Jesus and believing in his claims about himself.

After establishing the center in 1997, some showings of the film "Jesus"[3] were undertaken in cooperation with mission agencies working in the area, though Raed reports that no lasting results regarding his church planting goal ensued. From his interview, however, it is clear that Raed's main method of gospel presentation was personal testimony to those with whom he had a relationship. After 1997 this included the center's employees.

Raed also expressed in his interview a commitment to a lifestyle that he considered different to the wider community around him, one that reflected gospel teaching, and in consequence was a major factor in his gospel presentation.

He states:

> And so as I made the decision to allow the gospel to transform my life, then other people witnessed that and they wanted to see why and how and so forming a small group at first – it was a matter of finding hope in the middle of despair, kind of an encouragement for people that there is hope, there is a way – just to give the people something to hang on to. So we started to meet – and the contrast with the local corruption, dishonesty, lack of love, is what attracted people to small group or Bible study. So we started as a small Bible study group.

The response to this method among the Druze was generally positive, beginning with the clan leader on the first night of their return to the village, who said, "…if I was going to endorse a different religion, it would be Islam, but I don't believe in any of them any ways…but I'm glad that you believe and that you are making this faith part of your life." In ending that story, Raed reflects, "and so he endorsed me by that." This was an important step, it would appear, in Raed's perception of how he (and his message) were initially accepted in the community. His wider family also quickly accepted them.

As Raed states:

> I have a very large family and my cousins were coming and asking – what's this, have you changed your religion, have you disgraced us, dishonored us and so on, but after we talked for a little while they would say no, this is actually really good, we're happy that you're doing this. And so many of them would come and ask us for prayers, when they had a problem, can you pray for this, pray for healing, pray for this problem, so on and so forth.

Clearly it would appear that Raed was able to establish himself as a spiritual person despite holding to a different belief system than the rest of his family. Raed summarizes his approach to gospel witness as he says, "So this has become *the* (Raed's emphasis) way that we evangelize, is

[3] *Jesus.* Directed by Peter Sykes and John Krish. Burbank: Warner Bros, 1979.

to just let people come to us, to ask us for help when it comes to God and faith, anything that has to do with God."

- Opposition:

Another member of the Mountain Church, Rashid, also accepted the faith claims of Christ while he was abroad. Similarly to Raed, Rashid began sharing with his family on his return to the Near East, using his personal testimony. The initial response seemed more negative than experienced by Raed.

As Rashid shares:

> When I came to the Near East**,** I (had) a lot of problems with our families. "You believe in Jesus Christ? (they said) You can go to the hell." Everywhere we went, we (would) sit and talk about Jesus. And my family and her (referring to his wife) family told us, "Don't speak about Jesus. All the community will (cast) you out, you will be humiliated, you will be rejected." I told them I believe in Jesus and he's my God. And the Bible says if you are ashamed of me in the face of people, I'll be ashamed of you. And anything that happens to me I accept it.

Rashid and his wife felt this pressure keenly as they returned to the Near East. Rashid's wife particularly felt the pressure and stopped going to the fellowship for a period of time. As Rashid says, "She became afraid of her family and from society." They then resumed worshipping with the believing community after a while but allowed her parents to keep their daughters with them. This continued for a short period of time and then the family resumed worshipping together with the wider fellowship in the mountains.

Eventually the attitude of Rashid's family and friends changed but only after a long period of time.

Rashid reports:

> After 10 years their ideas changed. In the first they were (opposing) us…but now our families began to believe – my sister believed in Jesus Christ. And a lot of friends began to feel that there were a lot of changes in our lives. Ten years ago they thought that this was something that would go after two, three years. But after 10 years they started to say he's going further and further with his belief – and his life has changed. A lot of things in my life changed – and they started to ask.

Clearly, as in the case of Raed, a changed lifestyle was a major part of Rashid's witness to his new faith and a convincing factor that changed the attitude of family and friends. This impacted not only family but also others in the village. Rashid explains:

> I've also heard of others that believed in Jesus but did not have the courage to say it (to others). Now they're saying, "Oh good, he is a believer in Jesus" …they started to be more courageous and say they believe.

- Bible studies for the inquisitive:

As reflected by Raed previously, personal testimony with a lifestyle in keeping with the gospel message then progressed to small groups studying the Bible.

Raed elaborates:

> So we started a platform (referring to the education center), employed some people, lived with them for several months, and they saw our lives, the family and myself, and they started to ask questions, and we started to study the Bible together, and then after a while they made confessions of Christ and then they went into wanting to pray every day – we started every day prayer at the platform. Actually that is how the group started now that I think of it…

- Empowering the church for relational witness:

Raed also reflects that after the 2006 conflict there began a new phase in their church life. He sees it as a "different phase and yes I think it was a shift in our understanding, in our role and also in our willingness to let go of how much control we have over the situation." The leadership focused on relationships within the gathering and also on teaching and practicing unity, mutual submission, and on, as Raed says:

> A process of using the gifts…God has a story that he's writing and so there's a lot of inspirational push coming through and then Druze families started telling everyone around them and started bringing families to Christ. We just expanded that way. It was actually motivating the new believers.

This observation appears to also be confirmed by Rashid. As previously mentioned**,** despite initial strong opposition from family and friends**,** there has been a gradual acceptance of Rashid and his family's faith position**,** with some extended family members and friends embracing that position with them.

Description of Contemporary Church Practice

- Meeting structure:

Raed describes a typical gathering in the education center that starts at 11:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning. The meeting will begin with a lengthy time of singing. This singing has the purpose, he

believes, of coming into the presence of God and is typically followed by a session of prayer where all have a chance to share requests for prayer and to have them prayed for. This would normally last for 20 minutes, Raed states. Then a teaching session, based on the Bible and taught usually by Raed, follows and would generally last for somewhere between 25 to 35 minutes. This he sees as the framework for what he calls the "big table discussions" where the sermon or teaching is discussed as a group. Apparently everyone (16 and up) has the opportunity to share opinions and ask questions at "the big table," though it also seems that Raed will raise some questions if he feels their sharing is not within the body of teaching held by the fellowship. On occasion the fellowship does celebrate the Eucharist.

There are also other occasions when some in the group would meet. On Friday nights some of the group will gather in an attendee's home for a time of singing and study. The study, which is around the Bible, is led by the host. Raed attends these meetings. On Wednesday mornings there is a women's meeting in the center which he does not attend. Raed says, "And then we have Wednesday morning meetings where we have the women's Bible study by themselves. They sit, they talk and talk and talk, I don't have any idea what they say."

- Decision-making:

Regarding leadership in the group, Raed relates how he is very involved in most of the decisions that affect the gathering but he still holds to a group leadership model.

He says:

> We are a football team. So we have different alignments, different line-ups, an American football team. We have different line-ups for different situations. You have offense and defense, there's not the same guy leading the offense and the defense, and there's not the same play that we do over and over again. In some plays one person is leading, in another play another person is leading. And so it's the same way with decisions. Yesterday when we were casting out demons the people that were leading are normally not leaders within the community but they were the ones that led that time. In decisions of servanthood, serving, you know one group would lead, in decisions of administration another person would lead. So on, so forth.

Raed also feels:

> I'm least involved in decisions of connecting. Introducing people – people will introduce someone to the community at will on their own without checking with me so that's a decision that is very decentralized and who they introduce, who they connect with, that's up to them.

Seen in the light of their strong emphasis on deep relationships within the group this appears to be a major area of community life that Raed has entrusted to the attendees. Obviously this affects both the growth and day-to-day living of the group.

In this context Raed reveals his changing role:

> I think it was a shift in our understanding, in our role, and also in our willingness to let go of how much control we have over the situation. Maybe when I was 35, 36 it had to go in a way in which I could control it, right now I don't care if I control it or not. Just whatever he (God) wants, it's his job, his work – we're just here along for the ride.

Despite his strong position in the group as founder and teaching elder while also being involved in most of the meetings and most of the decisions made in the group, it is interesting to observe Raed's sense of loss of control. This is due to the fact that most of the connections and growth, with the relational implications, occur beyond his sphere of influence.

- Raed's role:

He sees his present role as being in the following two areas. Firstly, he sees himself as having a balancing influence on the group as a whole in his position as teaching elder.

He reflects:

> Actually we spend quite a bit of time trying to balance understanding the Word (meaning the Christian Scriptures) and listening to the Spirit, so that we don't lose track and one of the things that worries me is that not a lot of us are sensitive to that. If I wasn't here, that situation would deteriorate because it would go to one extreme or the other. You'll find people just Word only, others Spirit only, and there's not this balance which we have to really, really be careful about. Or maybe it's because God has me in that role and if I go he'll have somebody else in that role and he will speak to that person. Then I don't have to worry about it.

Secondly, he sees himself as shepherding the relationships that have already been established.

> And absolutely I would say "relationships" is the defining theme of my life, to see the relational bond between people, you know so church is not just people. It's people and the relationships between them. And if I pay attention to shepherding, not just the people but the relationships between them as well, then I think that is healthy for the church. So my insistence always is, as I'm involved in this church, is that I want healthy relationships. I don't want deceit, or deception, (rather) genuineness and genuine love. If you don't love someone, don't act like you do. We need to fix the situation. So many

> times I'm called upon to be an arbiter or something between two people, and the first rule that we start from is that this relationship is more important than anything else.

Often it appears that he is not alone in this role but shares it with some of the leadership.

Raed explains:

> We have a lot of Sunday afternoon, after the table, come up here and resolve problems, there's a lot of problems sometimes, people working together, you know, he didn't do this right so we try to settle. So it's not unusual to have 2 or 3 elders sitting here with 2 people and we're kind of regulating the good conflict, make the conflict come out…

- Community life:

This theme that Raed claims defines his life also appears to define the life of the gathering. As he states:

> We just had to really identify what is church, what are we really looking for, and I really believe that church is a relationship, like a marriage – marriage is a relationship, church is a relationship. Organization is good but it does not define it and so we found out that we had these relationships that we cannot deny and we want to keep them, we want to be faithful in these relationships.

This translates into large amounts of time spent socializing and being part of each other's lives. Raed observes that the attendees are "…always being over at each other's houses, there's always something like you know we have let's say 20-25 families, well, there's always two or three families together. And you can tell the families that are not part of that dynamic, everybody's trying to pull them in and bring them into that."

And again:

> We live life together, so our kids are living together. If there's a problem between our kids, then we fix it. And we do not accept competition or cutting down the other person among the kids as well. Now kids of 7 or 8 it's harder to do that with them, but very quickly they get with the program…they do things together, so we have rules for them as well and we have concerns for them. We all are raising this community together. Our nuclear family is preserved, we don't step over those boundaries, we don't try to interfere in private matters, but only what people want to share, that's what we share, but there's a lot being shared and a lot of our life is lived not at the level of the nuclear family but at the community.

Rashid also sees and experiences this. After an initial period of four or five months where Rashid and his family did not mix with other Lebanese who shared similar faith convictions, they were put into contact with Raed and proceeded to attend the Mountain Church. He expresses his sense of belonging to the fellowship from the very beginning. He continues: "when I met Raed and I came here I felt that here is my community…they accepted me as a part of them. I felt that I am welcome here. We started to be good as a family, in a short, a very short time, we felt that we (knew) each other from a long time."

Aisha, an Iraqi woman who was born and raised Shiite, confirms Rashid's experience:

> Yes, I feel like they're my family. (When) we got married here, Auntie[4] T___ was my mother, she took the role of my mother, and Auntie R___ was also like my mother. Even when we were in Syria or Iraq we felt like we had a family here. Even before we got here we felt that – this is a family.

This sentiment is shared by her husband, Hashem, also an Iraqi Shiite.

Raed does see, however, that the modern pace of life, and its resultant demands on time, is a great challenge to this type of close community living.[5] The influence of media and the contradictory values espoused, coupled with the need for the community's young people to travel down to the city (further exposing them to different ideas and values), presents other challenges that the fellowship is facing. Raed believes greater attentiveness to the Holy Spirit is the best way to confront these issues.

Another great challenge to the community is the ease with which the internet can help foster new relationships. Though Raed sees some great advantages to this as the fellowship's sphere of influence expands, he also sees some complications, particularly as it relates to the highly-relational style of the community.

Raed elaborates:

> ...Now if we communicate directly to those people in Iraq, we're losing a lot of the relational capital that we're passing over – do you know what I mean? It's a short cut

[4] A term of endearment and respect rather than indicating blood relationship.

[5] Raed: "I don't think we have as much time as we did before, we have less time, we're pressed for time. So here we have to keep things where we can do other things. There's a lot of other demands on our time, so we got to keep it, we don't have unlimited time. Women have a greater role, much greater role than before. In the New Testament they had a huge role but somehow over the years maybe that diminished but here it's coming back, we see a lot of women very, very involved in the leadership and other ways. We have a huge culture, global culture, that is kind of over everything…and you have to deal with it somehow. And I would say this is different now...our kids have to travel in order to find work. Everybody being subject to kind of a conforming uniformity current of what's acceptable and what's not. We're having to deal with that a lot."

> and you lose relational capital – you've got to be real careful how much you tax that relationship – you cannot tax it too much. They are not willing to do for you what they are willing to do for the friend that ties you together and so you've got to be able to be careful not to overstep your bounds in that way – that's what I mean by complicates things. And so we've got to be careful not to overstep our bounds in terms of asking these people to …… or treating them as if they are really close when actually they are not as close as you think they are.

Raed feels that this close fellowship is a great strength but also sees a weakness in this methodology and church expression. With such great emphasis placed on community and relationships, Raed does not see how this can be reproducible without a large commitment of time.

He reflects:

> ...we don't have a seminar or system where you can sit down and realize what we're doing. Everybody will say you've got to spend six months with us, you know, if you want to know what we're doing, come spend six months, look at the interaction, see what's going on and then you'll know. And for people who have done that, that's what happened, it's like wow, OK, that's what's going on here. It's about relationships, it's about the interaction that goes on. Actually that's a weakness, actually you can't package and circulate it.

In his opinion this slows down the rate by which church planters and church leaders can be raised up, particularly if people come from outside the fellowship to be trained.

- The fellowship's place and role in the wider community:

Raed was quite positive about the role of the fellowship in the wider community. Many of the attendees are well-educated or hold responsible jobs and so are considered favorably by the wider community.[6] Some attendees, after joining the fellowship, have reconciled with estranged family members or neighbors in obedience to the teachings of Christ, further adding to their good report. People in the fellowship, particularly the leadership, have been involved in reconciling broken relationships between friends or family and have also been involved in marriage counseling in the community. As mentioned previously, Raed believes that he and the fellowship have been endorsed by the clan leaders. It would appear from the interview that the fellowship has received endorsement from a powerful Druze politician as well. As expressed by one of the politician's aides, "If he didn't want you there, you wouldn't be there."

[6] Raed: "It doesn't matter what an individual would say. But we haven't abandoned our roles in the general community either. We are still there, we're very much there. I mean a lot of us are very well-educated, we have people who are really looked up to and appreciated."

This has not always been the case. Raed remembers:

> A lot of people (in the fellowship)…take a lot of negative words, but the bigger we become the easier it becomes. Because we're not alone and when you have a big family of 100 people or so then you've got so much positive that (the) negative doesn't really matter anymore. Everybody now is saying, "Well, thank you for your opinion." It used to just stress them out a lot, what do I do - my brother wants to kick me out of the inheritance, my brother won't talk to me anymore or something like that but it's a phase that passes, that has passed, I think.

Influences

- The church planter:

The church planter is a Western-educated, middle-aged male from the Druze community who lived for a number of years in a foreign country. He is married to a Westerner and they have four children. He identifies himself as a Druze believer in Christ though is understood by his wider family and clan to be a Christian. His relatives sometimes refer to him as a priest.[7] Having embraced the Christian faith in his late teens while overseas he has been overt about his faith stance to his wider family and community. However, he intentionally has not changed his official registration as a Druze. He is called "the shepherd"[8] by the adherents and is the main teaching elder of the fellowship.

It is clear from his interview that relationships, and the right to have those relationships, are a very important concept in Raed's thinking.[9] As he says, "Absolutely I would say relationships are the defining theme of my life." This "theme" appears to have a strong influence on his methodology in proclaiming the gospel message and also in the resultant expression of the church in the mountains. This will be explored later in this chapter.

Raed recalls having a similar group to his present church plant when he was abroad. The small church there is still worshipping together after 25 years and has given Raed a framework with which to evaluate his own church planting methodology today. His experience with other groups also leads him to state "…I have a lot of desire, conviction built in from previous groups to focus on the Word of God. And to make sure that discipleship is in the forefront, you know."

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[7] Raed: "First they called me priest, because the Catholic is the closest Christian reference point they have, so they were calling me a priest, and they were asking me – have you become a priest? So when I clarified that it's really about having a relationship with Christ, not about changing your religion, that I would never change my ID as a Druze, they were a lot more open."

[8] Shepherd is the English translation of the Arabic word *raa'i*.

[9] He uses the word over 20 times in his interview.

Raed has a doctorate in missiology which has led him to read extensively. He feels that his reading has helped him to be more balanced in his thinking and helps him to express his vision and experience more clearly. He does not believe that his reading has taught him new principles or approaches, however. It would appear from his interview that the opposite is true.

He states:

> Actually it's opened my eyes to how sad the situation actually is. Everybody just keeps looking to organizational solutions when the problem is a relational problem. …So that we have perfect organizational structures, or beautiful, large organizational structures that can do a lot of things but they cannot impact relationships. They can't plant churches. One observation I have had from the reading is how many people will change the vision of church planting so that they can succeed. OK, I can't plant a church, maybe I evangelize. So I'll take evangelism as my goal and I'll go after it that way.

Clearly his reading revealed to him what he did not want to do, particularly as he evaluated everything through the lens of "relationships" which would appear to be the rubric of his church planting efforts.

- The New Testament:

Raed sees in Matthew chapter 10 and in Luke chapter 9 strong parallels between the way in which the disciples were sent out to the people of Israel and the way of church planting adopted by him and his fellow workers.

He says:

> He sent them out to the people of Israel, so he sent people of Israel to the people of Israel. And I see a very important point here is that – I am already part of the community, so I was coming to reach a community that I'm already a part of, I'm not trying to come in…

and again:

> And when Jesus said go into a household, I think that – you know people just don't let anyone in their household – and as long as you stay with them. I think this was two people going to a town saying things like 'I'm Nathanael from the tribe of so and so, would you let me stay with you for a while?" and then he would find someone there who knows Nathanael's uncle, who's done business with him and he says sure come on in – you have been hospitable to me before – I think it is that kind of thing. It's not just by chance that these people would receive them, that they would offer them to stay at their home. And that's the same way I understood it – I came back based on what my

> father's relationship was to these people, they received me, and my father had sown in the past – and what he sowed I reaped. So I see a lot of parallel with the hospitality and the natural connection that's there. This is not like strangers, totally unknown strangers, walking into a totally unknown community – these are tribes of Israel and most likely they have some kind of connection, so and so, son of so and so from that town, well, we know them, you know, it's the same we have here with the Druze. So actually what I am saying is that there was already the right to relationship present, I was not coming as somebody totally unknown.

Clearly Raed does not regard himself as an outsider in the Druze community, and despite his faith in Christ rather than the Druze religion, does not believe that the Druze community sees him as an outsider either. In fact, in the story of their faith endorsement by the clan leader (sheikh), Raed sees a direct scriptural correspondence to the "worthy man" (Matthew 10:11) who allows the disciples to stay. He believes that the twelve, sent only to the tribes of Israel, were also insiders with the "right to relationship" that Raed has in his community.

When asked if he could see the contemporary practice of their gathering correlating with New Testament practice he responded:

> What I just mentioned does not necessarily compare a lot. But what I mentioned earlier about the always being over at each other's houses…in that sense I think it's a lot like New Testament, that we're doing things together. The meetings, like Sunday morning, I really like the part of sitting around the table and discussing things, because it gives everybody a chance to speak up. So that sounds to me like the interaction that the disciples had when they were like arguing who was the greatest or, you know, talking about different issues why did you curse the fig tree, or are we going to perish, you know everybody had a chance to speak up.

Another interviewee, Hashem, is convinced by his reading of the New Testament that the basis for witness is a transformed life. In his witness, therefore, he seeks to establish strong personal relationships with people to demonstrate that change.

> …because it says in the Bible unless you do good works how will people know you are different, not only that people would see us but that God would see that there's something different in us – there is new birth. What is the new birth? We must be different, we must be changed.

Hashem and Aisha firmly believe that the Scriptures teach the necessity and the efficacy of the gospel for all peoples, not just the Jews, and also not just for those from traditional Christian families. Making reference to the book of Matthew and the book of Acts, Hashem feels that

fellowships like the Mountain Church, which is made up of people from various religious traditions, are a logical result of the commands of Christ.[10] Aisha feels that perhaps there is a greater sense of unity and acceptance among people, like her, who were not raised Christian but have now came to a belief in the faith claims of Christ.[11] Hashem agrees.

Although Rashid is actively engaged in sharing his personal faith convictions with family and friends and does this in a relational way, he does not seem to draw his inspiration from the New Testament for his methodology of witness. He does, however, attribute his bold and consistent testimony to a conviction rooted in the teachings of Christ.

Remarkably, Rashid had little to say about the New Testament in relation to his method of witness (as opposed to the content of his witness) apart from the statement that he needed to be unashamed of testifying to the Christ in public.[12] This is also true in regard to the pattern of worship that the Druze fellowship, of which he is an elder, has adopted for their regular meeting times.

Raed had much to say regarding the New Testament and their approach to mission, church planting, and church practice. However, my strong impression is that Raed was drawing parallels with what they are doing and the New Testament pattern rather than seeing the New Testament as a blueprint for what they do. Raed did not in any way indicate that he consulted the New Testament first before embarking on mission or deciding on church practice. Rather it would appear that he adopted methodology and practice that he had observed in the past as indicated below. Stronger influences appear to have been their own personal journey of faith and the way that they were approached with the faith claims of Christ, and how they were subsequently instructed or discipled in this new faith.

The structure of the worship service would appear to be very similar to how services are conducted in evangelical churches in the Near East region and indeed from my own experience in many other parts of the world. On the surface it would appear that culture (context) is not a

[10] Hashem: "This is because the Bible says that God loved the world, not just the Jews, that those that believe in him will have eternal life. The same thing is written in the last chapter of the book of Matthew where it says go into all the world, all the Gentiles, teaching them all that I have commanded you and teaching them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit… also in the Book of Acts it says to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit and then beginning in Jerusalem and Samaria (go to)…the ends of the earth. God sent his Son for everyone. Some people think he is just for the Christians but when Jesus came they were not Christians, he came to the Jews and then those Jews became believers in Jesus. He didn't send them just to the Jews but to the whole world. Because of this…here maybe because they are from a different background we feel closer to them. I don't know but we don't feel that there is a difference."

[11] Aisha: "I want to say that we are all from different backgrounds but we have been made new in Christ. People don't think this one was Druze, this one was Muslim. I don't think that they think this way because we're all on the same path." See previous footnote for Hashem's quote.

[12] Quoted earlier in the section.

particularly strong influence. However, the way that they regard church as family, as opposed to the voluntary association that one often observes in the U.S.A., would challenge this thought even though at first glance the service would appear to be very Western. This will be explored to a greater degree in the section under community.[13]

- Culture:

The Druze culture has had a significant influence on Raed's life. Aspects of the social structure of Druze society appeared to fuel Raed's desires that led him to seek a new faith. In addition it seems to have inspired the resulting church planting methodology that he used among his people.

He describes those desires in the following:

> So the whole idea is here, is that as Druze, it's always been my heart's desire to belong to the perfect family. I want my family to be perfect. In other words, generous, hospitable, honest, very strong, not weak. With the patriarch[14] being just, I want my patriarch to be beautiful and perfect. And you know that that's not the case, they're all human and they're broken and fallen. But then when we found Jesus, our patriarch, and the Father being so perfect I wanted to belong to this family. And so this Druze is very attracted to belonging to the family of God, to the household of God.

He then describes the resultant church practice that flows out of that desire and witness to the community. This will be discussed later in the chapter.

Another issue that is noteworthy is the strong influence that their initial faith encounters and subsequent journey has had on both Hashem's methodology[15] and Rashid's methodology[16] of mission and witness. They both were approached by an individual who had an ongoing relationship with them and who not only shared his personal experience with them but also encouraged them to inquire for themselves from the Scriptures.[17] As both Hashem and Rashid shared their approach to witness and mission this approach featured prominently.

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[13] Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 115.

[14] Clan leader.

[15] Hashem: "The same way that I came to faith is the way (the church) is sharing with unbelievers - because the way that I came to faith was through a man that I was living with…every day I was exposed to the gospel. It was relational."

[16] Rashid: "Anywhere (everywhere), we sit and talk about Jesus."

[17] Hashem: "(My friend) wanted to talk to me about Jesus and I told him that if he wanted to talk to me about Jesus again, against Islam and Mohammed, I did not want to talk to him again. After that he gave me the Bible and I started to read it - but I started reading so that I could show my friend that this book was not from God. Little by

- Identity:

I have decided not to give space in this piece to exploring the varied contemporary views on identity theory, which in the end could be a thesis in itself. This research will focus instead on how the adherents of each church viewed themselves. An assessment will then be made as to the influence this self-description had on both the model of mission and the shape of the community in each of the examined fellowships. The very helpful observations by Green[18]and Kraft[19] on identity theory, particularly as it relates to Muslims converting to Christianity, will be referenced on occasion.

Raed, who calls himself "a Druze believer in Christ," has led the fellowship to remain within the larger Druze community.[20] He explains:

> … we have a very clear identity, who we are. We are Druze, we're not evangelical.[21] We make that decision very clear. And I think that was one of the best decisions we made. As far as avoiding a lot of the hassle and obstacles by far that really has opened up a lot, a wider door for Druze to come to faith, just by saying no, we're Druze, we'll never change. I believe in Jesus. Is there a problem with Druze believing in Jesus? Most of them say no, you can do whatever you want as long as you are Druze. So it's just a label, but it means that much to them. I think that's a strength.

As seen previously, and as is reiterated above, this has allowed Druze believers in Christ to engage the community in witness and model their lifestyles on their newfound beliefs. It is interesting to compare this decision with comments by Fuad Khuri in his chapter on Druze social structure. In this piece he states:

> The Druze grant individuals freedom of choice in the practice of religion since they consider religion to be a private experience between man and God that should not be divulged publicly to others. However, not all aspects of Druze religious tradition are

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little I began to read and then I saw that the book was very nice. Then I began to see in my mind more and more that this book was right."

[18]See Tim Green, "Conversion in the Light of Identity Theories," in *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between*, ed. David Greenlee, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013), Kindle edition, chapter 5.

[19] See Kraft, "*Community and Identity,*" PhD diss.

[20] Although Barnett is writing about Muslims changing their faith convictions, Raed's language seems to be very similar to the people Barnett interviewed. Barnett proposes a concept of dual identity. See Jens Barnett, "Refusing to Choose: Multiple Belonging Among Arab Followers of Christ," in *Longing for Community*, ed. David Greenlee, Kindle edition, chapter 3.

[21] Raed is referring to the official, registered religious confession called "Evangelical" that is present in the Near East.

> optional. In particular, being or not being a Druze is not a matter of choice. Born Druze, a person remains Druze; it is a public right.[22]

When Rashid first returned from abroad he told his family that he had become a Christian, a term he quickly changed to a Druze believing in Jesus Christ because of his family's reaction.[23] Despite his insistence on identifying himself as a Druze believer in Christ, he still encounters suspicion and rejection on occasion, as some believe he has become a Christian. He states:

> …my brother was with the religious Druze, and this particular religious Druze was a judge for the region, and he said to my brother, "Oh, your brother is a Christian – this is very bad and he will lose a lot of things if he stays there, he is a good doctor but he will lose a lot of things, a lot of prestige, positions, and so on" and my brother comes to me and tells me (that if) you are a Christian all of society will be opposed to me.

Interestingly enough, despite the fact that the mountain fellowship meets in a learning center, a building that does not bear any resemblance to a traditional church in the Near East, Rashid still tells his relatives that he is attending church each week.[24] One wonders whether the confusion between religious terminology also is a contributing factor to some believing that he has officially become a Christian.

However, it would appear that the fellowship has found to a large extent a way to exist and practice their beliefs in front of their relatives and friends and indeed within Druze society. Despite suspicion and negative reactions at first, by consistently affirming their Druze identity an acceptance in the community was eventually found. As their numbers grew, negative responses grew easier to tolerate also.

From the interview it emerges that within this wider Druze community they have created their own extended family. Calling themselves the Lord's family, Raed observes:

> …we define the church as God's family, the household of God, and we do what our father does. And he talks to us that way, "be ye holy because I am holy" and so it's like father, like son, because I'm your father and I'm holy then you should be holy, too. Otherwise it doesn't make sense. Why would he ask us to be holy because he is holy? So if we're not his sons, we shouldn't be holy. But if we are his sons, we should be holy.

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[22] Fuad Khuri, "Aspects of Druze Social Structure: There Are No Free-Floating Druze," in *The Druze: Realities and Perceptions*, ed. Kamal Salibi (London: Druze Heritage Foundation, 2005), 64.

[23] Rashid: "No, (the) first time I told them that I believe in Jesus, (that) I'm a Christian, but I saw that this thing shook them. And now I tell them I am Druze, believing in Jesus Christ."

[24] Rashid: "Because when we come Sunday we tell our parents that we are going to the church. So they think it's a church."

> So that is the way we see ourselves as a family, trying to live up to our father's standard, and we know we can't do that in the flesh, but he gives us his Spirit and he does it through us. I would say that's how we see ourselves.

And Raed goes on to express his own personal journey in this regard:

> This is my real family. And actually my brother, who became a believer, sometime ago was telling me I thought we were family when we were brothers in the flesh but now I realize that we're family more because we're part of the Lord's family.

Rashid also strongly reiterates the sentiment when he expresses his belief that God "makes us to choose between the world's family or the believers' family, which is the family made by Jesus the Lord. And for this reason I like this description, the Lord's family. We are part of the Lord's family."

Hashem, who was raised in a Shiite family, expresses some of his own struggle with identity. "I was like somebody in the middle. I wasn't a Muslim and I wasn't a Christian," he states, "but I appealed to God and he gave me what I asked for. And so I believed in Christ after two years of study." He then goes on to describe his faith journey and his struggles with being accepted in the established evangelical church. He states, "They didn't believe that people from Muslim background could become Christians and so they did not welcome us in the church."[25]

In the mountain fellowship both Hashem and his wife Aisha see a vast difference in how they are treated and accepted. Aisha believes that this is because the majority of people in the mountain fellowship are from non-Christian traditions. "I want to say that we are all from different backgrounds but we had been made new in Christ, people don't think this (person) was Druze, this (person) once was Muslim. I don't think that they think this way because we're all on the same path."

Despite feeling quite attached to the Mountain Church, Hashem does sense some distance that he did not experience in a previous fellowship that he attended in another country.

Hashem explains:

> Here we are very close to people but there (back in his birth country) we were all (of one nationality) and all from Muslim background. We have been here eight months and it is still we are (from country A) and you are (from country B), we are Muslim, you are

[25] Seemingly a common experience for BMBs. See Jens Barnett, "Living a Pun: Cultural Hybridity among Arab Followers of Christ," in *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah or Somewhere in Between,* ed. David Greenlee, Kindle edition, chapter 4.

> Druze. Maybe after a year or two we will get a lot closer but it's not as close as when we were in (our birth country), where we were all Muslims, all from (one country), and being together for three years.[26]

Though clearly experiencing a sense of family and strong relationships with the Mountain Church, nationality and religious backgrounds still were factors in how deeply Hashem and Aisha were able to develop relationships. Hashem seems to imply that more time was needed, perhaps, to overcome some of these differences.[27]

Summary

The interviews with the Mountain Church members outlined the fellowship's history from its beginnings as a small group in a school to its present gathering of around 100 adherents. Focusing on a relational, family-centered witness (that would naturally lead to Bible studies for the inquisitive), the fellowship continued to grow despite opposition. The interviews not only outlined contemporary practice but they also revealed the strong value that relationships hold in the fellowship, their sense of community, and their self-understanding as the "family of the Lord." The significant role that the church planter plays in the life of the fellowship also came to light. Culture, identity, and the New Testament were also seen by the interviewees to be key factors in forming values and shaping both community and mission praxis.

The City Church Community

Introduction

The following is a descriptive summary of two interviews conducted at the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013 with the leaders of the City Church community. They are identified by the pseudonyms Boutros and Boulos. Boutros is an Arabic-speaking Middle Easterner in his late thirties who was raised partly in the USA. He is supported financially from the USA and serves the center full time. Boulos is also an Arabic-speaking Middle Easterner in his late thirties to early forties and is supported financially to some extent by the center. Both Boutros and Boulos were born into traditional Christian families and also regularly attend evangelical churches in the city where they reside.

This section describes the beginnings and current praxis of the City Church community, the connection between the house churches and the center, and the leadership structure. Some space is also given to outlining how the adherents describe themselves, along with major

[26] Hashem mentions different countries and nationalities repeatedly in this quote. Specific country names and nationalities have been removed for security reasons.

[27] Betts talks about the enmity that traditionally exists between the Druze and Shiite communities. See Robert Brenton Betts, *The Druze* (New Haven: Yale, 1988), 20.

influences that have shaped this community. Some of the outstanding themes are focused on in more detail in comparison with the other churches examined in this study.

Beginnings (the center)

The City Church is a curious example of an evangelism and discipleship ministry focused around a center that unintentionally evolved into a church. Concurrent to this evolution a house church ministry also emerged from similar evangelistic activity undertaken by those connected with the center.

The center, situated in a poor and ethnically diverse section of a large Middle Eastern city, was originally started by a Palestinian Muslim convert in 2009. He has since left the country seeking asylum elsewhere and the leadership of the center has passed to Boutros.

Boutros describes its beginnings:

> I think that it evolved pretty quickly because I think that the center, when it was established, filled a need that was already there. So there was no shortage of new believers that wanted to be discipled and needed a place to stay. So I think the congregation just started because there were a lot of people in that area that were just so close, that they wanted to be a part of this thing that was happening. It was a place that they could learn about Christ that was in their neighborhood.

Now the center's leadership sees it as a place to fill in the gaps between the evangelistic outreach to Muslims and the integration of Muslim converts into local evangelical churches.[28] Many of the attendees, however, would possibly see the center in a different light. As Boutros states, "I think their sense of church home still is with the center, because they don't feel completely welcome in the national church, in the formal churches."

Description of Contemporary Church Practice

With activities ranging from worship services to discipleship classes and Bible studies, the center would have some kind of meeting five nights a week. Possibly up to 100 people, the majority of those "committed Christians,"[29] would attend at least one of those meetings. This congregation is mainly made up of adherents who are officially Kurdish Muslims and reside close to the center. There are also some Muslims (including refugees) from other parts of the Middle East and North Africa who regularly attend along with those born into local Christian

[28] Boutros: "So that's part of the reason why we don't want to be, you know, be identified as a church. Because we want to be, we feel that we are a missing piece of what, you know, we are something that's missing in the church in the Middle East. So we're trying to be that and not everything. We're not trying to be the whole body, we're trying to be the missing piece, so that we can link the abundance of new believers that we are discipling into other churches, so that we don't have to grow immensely in order to be all things to all people."

[29] A term that Boutros used.

communities. Boutros states that, in addition to the regular adherents, there are many "seekers" who would attend meetings for a period of time.

- Mission:

At the core of the center is a residential discipleship program for believers from Muslim background. Participants, some of whom have been persecuted and ostracized for their faith convictions, usually stay from between two to four months, spending much of that time involved in the center's activities. The residents also participate in street evangelism and the distribution of evangelistic tracts, DVDs, and Scriptures.

This overt method of witness is the main way that people are drawn to the center and new relationships are formed. This outreach is done at least once a week by residents in the discipleship program, as well as by regular attendees of the center's activities and members of evangelical churches present in the area or neighboring suburbs.

Boulos elaborates on their witness, insisting that a polemic approach is very unproductive. He describes a typical conversation:

> We meet them on the streets and we begin with Jesus loves you…they are surprised to hear that Jesus loves them…and we would like to give you a gift and in that gift is Jesus. We ask about their families and where they live and express our hope that their families are safe. And then you see that they begin to open up their hearts…then my wife and I go and visit them, sit with them, and get to know them.

Boutros states that they have no intentional methodology other than going onto the streets and finding interested people. Perhaps he means that they have no formulaic method of presenting the Christian message, as it would appear from both Boutros' and Boulos' interviews that they do have a clear methodology.

Boutros outlines this in the interview when he says:

> There's no method, no intentional method other than just going out and trying to find people that are interested in hearing about Jesus. We get their contact information and follow them up, visit them, and things like that...people that are interested are invited to meetings at the center, usually a worship service, or they're just invited socially to come in and meet people. There are Bible discussions and studies that are happening at different times throughout the week. So there's lots of opportunities to take someone by the hand and say, "Hey, let's go to this place." There's also we're involved with a house group that meets in the home of the director of the center, or the residence manager of the center. So we invite them to that group as well…and then people come

> to Christ through people involved in the center, get plugged into the center, and then they bring friends and relatives that (also) believe.

Though the initial contact may be random and superficial, Boulos clearly states his commitment to the forming of intentional relationships and the involvement of the team in people's lives. He is convinced of the need for an incarnational witness among these people.

> Firstly, you need to live like them in all simplicity...you want to live the life of Christ…you need to be a little Jesus…a New Testament that they can read in front of them. They can see that you are a good person, they can see Jesus in your heart, that you are praying in fear for them. When they see you they see tears - you are weeping for them. From this place they will begin to repent. After the meetings lots of people came to me because of this – my love and the love of Jesus. People feel in this place there is love and peace - in other places they did not experience that.

- Community:

There are various types of gatherings connected to the City Church, from discipleship studies to house church meetings to weekly worship services. There are two meetings that they call worship services during the week that are structured like a typical evangelical service in the Middle East region. This has the intention of easing integration of these Muslim background believers into existing evangelical congregations.[30] Attendees sit in rows on chairs, facing forwards, with those leading the meeting standing in the front. Services begin with a welcome followed by announcements and an opening prayer. A time of singing songs and hymns (that would be familiar to most evangelical churches in the city) is followed by an offering, a time of prayer and a sermon. On Thursdays the sermon tends to be more discipleship-themed while on Saturday it is usually evangelistic in nature. The sermon is followed by prayer, some more announcements, and then a closing. The service usually lasts between 60 to 90 minutes and the sermons are usually delivered by guest speakers from the wider evangelical community. The services are in Arabic as it is the common language among all the different ethnic backgrounds. The center's leadership has also found that the majority of Kurds cannot read or write in Kurmanji,[31] further confirming their decision to hold services in Arabic. Boutros states that the model of church that they practice each week is based on what is known by the adherents (mainly staff at the center from traditional Christian background) who lead the services. He

[30] Boutros: "We are trying to encourage people to go to other churches, to see what's happening in other churches, and the way that I as a leader look at the worship services that we do, as almost a church simulation. But it's very much we are doing church as much as the churches are doing it. But in a way we're doing like a Muslim-friendly version of church, not because we are the church but because we are an expression of ourselves."
[31] Kurdish dialect of the northern Kurds. See David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B.Tauris, 2004), 9-10.

believes that there has not been a conscious decision to conduct worship in a certain way. However, one would speculate that by not making a conscious decision on how church could or should look they have replicated the worship forms and structures of their previous church experiences with no thought to contextual particularity. Interestingly, Boutros sees the service "...as almost a church simulation…as we are doing church…as the churches are doing it. But in a way we are doing a Muslim-friendly version of church." Clearly he is not referring to the forms but rather one suspects to the general acceptance that Muslims would experience when they attend an evangelical church. One of the main goals of the center is to encourage the attendees to attend other churches, to see what is happening there and to find a church home outside of the center. This has happened for adherents on certain occasions though as seen below not for all.[32]

They are positioning themselves in the wider evangelical community not as a church but as a ministry/discipleship center. Consequently, they do not administer the sacraments or have official pastors and elders.

Boutros explains:

> I mean that when people go to a service where there's communion taken, they look at it as a church. And so that could be viewed as a competition by other churches, meaning that this is a distinct church body. We have kind of like a para-church structure and way of governing. We feel that we are something that's missing in the church in the Middle East. So we're trying to be that and not everything. We're not trying to be the whole body, we're trying to be the missing piece, so that we can link the abundance of new believers that we are discipling into other churches. I think some of the strengths that we bring as complementary to other churches is that we're big on evangelism, we're in an area that people are very open and are accepting Christ readily, and discipleship, in terms of discipleship we're strong on discipleship.

Faced with the complexity and apparent insecurity of the established evangelical churches that would perceive another church among predominantly Muslim background Kurds as a threat, Boutros, Boulos, and the rest of the leadership are seeking to establish the center as a transitional place as new adherents move on to other established places. However, the attendees do not see the center in this light.

Boutros states:

[32] Interviewer: "I'm sorry, what I mean by 'move on' would be moving on to an established, officially-registered, evangelical church."
Boutros: "Yeah, that does happen but also like they maintain their connection with the center."

> I think their sense of church home still is with the center, because they don't feel completely welcome in the national church, in the formal churches…a lot of the people that go to the center…call it a church…and there are many of them they don't go to any other church.

Clearly this center has evolved into a church home for many. Boutros also sees the advantage of having a center rather than exclusively meeting in homes. He believes that the building's ability to draw others in allows them to spend time "hanging out," which in turn creates a critical mass for ministry both to each other and to the community.[33]

Despite the confusion as to whether they are a church or not, the whole value of community and being committed to one another is one that the City Church holds highly. As mentioned previously, the leadership of the center tends not to see the group as a church, yet many of the adherents do. However, both groups agree that community life is essential, particularly for believers from Muslim background.

Boutros shared the comments of the members of the residential program who were discussing this very issue:

> …he said that that's the church that we go to on Sunday morning, but the center has more impact on us because we're here all the time, we're at home here and we're studying the Bible together here and we're doing it all here. But then they go to the church to kind of you know worship with the greater body of Christians.

The strong residential program, particularly for those who are being persecuted and ostracized for their faith positions, is a significant function of the center and something that Boutros sees as lacking in the established evangelical churches of the Near East. The location and physical setup of the center itself also lends itself to community building, Boutros believes, as it gives a place for adherents to socialize and fellowship together outside of the structured meetings.[34]

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[33] Boutros: "I think one of the missing pieces of the church of today is the communal aspect of it, so we see people congregating on Sundays or certain nights of the week at the church building rather than really living together in a community. So this center, because of the residential component, I see it as filling some of the gaps between the early church, what we conceptualize as the early church, and the church today. Because there is that communal aspect, there are people that are always hanging out there and talking about the Bible and it's kind of like there's a critical mass that's happening there that's able to attract others, kind of be a central gathering place."

[34] Boutros: "I've been involved in groups that have never had really a central kind of focal point of orbit. So that's one distinguishing factor is that actually this, as much as the West has kind of, scorns the idea of a building, and said oh we don't need a building, we'll just do home groups. The building aspect of it has made a certain magnetism that actually saves a lot of work. Because I think when you're trying to get things started with home groups often you have to do a lot of work to get people to start congregating at certain times and things like that. Whereas when you have a specific center, even if it's just basically a glorified apartment, because it has a

This is particularly significant for the majority of adherents who are single migrant workers, refugees, or from homes that are antagonistic toward the gospel of Christ. This creates space for this normal function of church life which would probably happen in people's homes in other church contexts.

- Leadership structure:

There is a leadership structure that exercises authority and leads generally by consensus. There are very practical issues around the center and the residential program that Boutros explains are looked after by the residents themselves. However, issues regarding teaching, theological positions, etc., are talked through at a leadership level and a consensus position is reached. If there is not a consensus, then Boutros will make a decision but only in consultation with his mission organization leadership which is based in the USA.

Boutros and Boulos express their deep commitment to the members of the City Church both in the center and in its house church expression. Boulos was quite animated during the interview as he talked about the different people with whom he was involved, stating that he rejoices, cries, and prays with them all. He believes that many of them are drawn to the center and the house churches because of the genuine concern that they see in the leadership.

- The fellowship's place and role in the wider community:

Interestingly, Boutros states that some in the community regard the center as a church.[35] Residents and adherents have expressed a sense of acceptance by some in the community because of their connections to the center, and rejection and antagonism by others for those same connections. The same is also true of adherents' families' reactions to their involvement with the center. Some of the members of the City Church have suffered and continue to suffer persecution and ostracism for their faith positions, a number joining the residential program as a result of that ostracism. On the whole, though, Boutros believes that the City Church does not face much overt opposition.[36] In fact, in the interview he shares the story of the local Shiite mosque, with whom they have relations, whose leadership expressed their knowledge of the center and what it does and added, "…if anybody gives you trouble, just let us know."

courtyard and a little room to meet in, that fact has had something solid to give people. Oh, I want to go to this place. So I think that that's one of the critical factors that is actually needed for this thing to even be happening."

[35] Boutros: "Some people look at it as a church, that they go to the church, or a center of some kind that they go to learn about Christianity."

[36] Boutros : "Yeah, positive and negative reactions. Some of them have been excommunicated from their families, some of them haven't. Some of them have no problem with it…I would say a majority of people that go, well, it depends on what the background is, because it is a mixed background. But when you account for the mix, I'd say a good majority of them don't have a significant amount of persecution for going."

Beginnings (the house churches)
Out of the center's outreach a house church (which has spawned off two other groups) also emerged. Started by Boulos, an active leader at the center, as a way for his immediate family to study the Scriptures together, the house church grew as interested neighbors became regular attendees. Soon people that Boulos had met through the street outreach also began attending. The house church has grown to between twenty to thirty regular attendees. Boulos and his wife also make regular home visits and are practically involved in a myriad of different ways with families and households in the community. Examples were given of helping old people around the house, young men in finding work, and distributing food to refugees. They visit over 40 households, other than those involved in the center or the house church, on a regular basis to assist in some practical way, pray, and share something from the Scriptures. Some of these visits are to Muslim women who have believed in the claims of Christ but are unable to attend either the house church or the center.

- Practice:

Typically, the house churches follow a Discovery Bible Study methodology.[37] Starting with a time of singing, followed by prayer and inductive study of the Scriptures, the meetings would usually last an hour and 45 minutes. Boulos is quite insistent that everyone participate in sharing prayer requests, praying for others in the group, and also sharing insights from the Scriptures. The groups have a strong emphasis on hospitality and personal relationships. Boulos likes to emphasize singing as this was key in his own personal conversion and he believes that through the practice of singing hymns, people find encouragement and freedom. The house churches continue to grow both through the integration of people met on the street and also through relationships of those adherents who are more established in the area.

The house churches continue to play an important role in the City Church community. Though many of the house church adherents are also involved in the center's programs, that is not true of all of them. Boulos expresses his belief that some Muslim inquirers are more comfortable and relaxed in a home setting and it would appear from the interview that the attendees of the house churches have strong fellowship with each other as they meet weekly. Despite Boulos' wish that house churches will divide and reproduce, it appears that the desire of the adherents is that they continue meeting all together. This is possibly an indicator of the level of the relationships that have been formed within these groups.

[37] Boulos: "We start with prayer, where every person needs to pray. Then we worship, then give a lesson from the Bible through a DBS. Then we thank God, for little things and big things. Then we see what we want to ask of God, about our kids, health, etc. Then we eat together and get to know them better, meet the new people. Guys with guys and girls with girls."

In comparison with the center, it is to be noted that Boulos believes there is far more opposition from the community than what Boutros described in his interview. This may be due to the fact that Boulos visits many people in their homes, some of whom cannot visit the center or the house churches because of family antagonism. It would appear that Boutros' main focus of ministry is with the center's attendees. Boulos gave many examples of the problems people are facing because of their faith stand but also shared a story of antagonistic parents won over by the compassion and concern for them by the house church during a period of sickness. The mother, once opposing, now attends the house church.

Influences

- The church planters:

I've decided to regard two Middle Eastern Christians as the main church planters of the City Church. This is because I see them both as very influential in the formation and direction of this church plant.

Boutros has been working with the center for a number of years though had only been in charge for just over a year at the time of writing. Apart from his duties at the center he also attends a local evangelical church on Sunday mornings. His father has been involved in evangelism, church planting, and Bible translation in the region for many years, giving Boutros a rich ministry tradition and a well-known name in the evangelical community.

Interestingly, when asked about the future of the church, Boutros replied:

> I'd like to see multiplication happening in discipleship classes. There have been a lot of people that expressed a desire to be discipled, and we're discipling those people. But we'd like to see them start splitting up into different groups of, you know, more advanced or topical groups or different kinds of Bible studies and we'd like to see more numbers of the people that are involved in the center actually enlisting in the discipleship classes.

Clearly his ministry thinking and planning revolve around the center. It would also appear from the interview with Boutros that a strong influence on his thinking is a suspicion of and, to a certain extent, rejection of Western missiological teaching.

He states:

> We kind of intentionally set ourselves apart from some of what we see as modern principles of church planting. Because we feel like the modern principles of church planting are based very much in anthropology, very much in social sciences. I think that a lot of these have humanistic presuppositions in terms of the way we look at culture. I

> think that the 21st century model wants to do distinct, culturally-bounded sets of people whereas what we're doing is kind of mixing in several different ethnicities.

And again:

> One thing that I'd like to add is that I think we don't encounter a lot of the 21st century church planting principles because most of the people that are working there are non-Western. So a lot of these issues that are going on in the journals, in the doctoral theses, in the missions magazines and conferences and all that, we don't have to deal with all those issues because most of the people that are, you know, that are ministering are locals. And I thank God for that.

Similar in age to Boutros, Boulos was born into a Maronite Catholic family and raised in the Near East in a major city. Married with young children, Boulos is a reformed substance abuser who embraced the claims of Christ nine years before the time of his interview. Although in contact with regular evangelical church attendees, it wasn't until he entered a church after hearing hymns sung that he had a personal religious experience. From that time he has been actively proclaiming the teachings of Christ and sharing his life story. In addition to leading the house church in his home he attends a local evangelical church on Sunday mornings. His home is in the same area as the center. He officially remains a Maronite Catholic.

In contrast to Boutros, when asked about the future of the house church Boulos replied:

> They would like to stay with me but I don't want them to stay with me. I want this group to become 2 groups and then 4 groups become 5. I want to see these groups spread, I am working a lot on this. I go to one house and am praying and then we start with 2 or 3 in that house and then they invite the neighbors. After a little while you have a small church in that house.

It is clear that Boulos' thinking about growth and strategy for the church is focused not on the center but rather on expanding the house church ministry in the same way that it was started.

- The New Testament:

Both Boutros and Boulos see quite a number of parallels between their approach to church planting and the approach that they understand to be from the New Testament. Boutros believes that there are many parallels between their ministry and the ministry that he reads about in the Book of Acts. In the Book of Acts, he believes, you see Christians evangelizing in public areas like the temple courts and markets, and worshipping God in the streets. He sees the City Church doing the same thing. Because of this overt worship on the streets, believers were added to the number of the church every day. He then goes on to state that this is exactly what is happening with the City Church and the area in which they are ministering. He also sees

strong parallels between the house churches and the groups of believers that met in courtyards or homes in the New Testament.

Boulos adds to the conversation but from a more relational aspect of their ministry:

> When Jesus was on earth he did good works, he would evangelize, he would pray, he would sit with the poor. In the same way we sit with our brothers, the Kurds. We sit on the ground with them, we drink tea with them. We don't have pride and we don't distinguish that we are different from them, "we are like you - we are your brothers."

Despite the tension of deciding whether their ministry, either in the center or in homes, is a church or not, they both see the church expressions as decidedly New Testament. The fact that they sing hymns, study the Scriptures, and pray together reflects the traits of the New Testament church according to their understanding.[38] They both also agree that the communal aspect to their ministry reminds them of New Testament churches. Boulos adds his observation that the New Testament churches met in homes to carry on the practices of singing, prayer, and Bible study as small groups in fellowship with one another. He believes that there was a lot of visiting each other at that time.

- Identity:

The church's outreach into the community faces many challenges. One of these challenges is the diverse and, to a large degree, fragmented community that surrounds the center. With many economic immigrants, refugees from the region, and the longer-term residents from traditional Christian background, the City Church's parish does not contain the long-established relationships that the other churches enjoy. Hence it is no surprise that the church overtly took their worship and witness to the streets. Seeing their evangelistic methodology as a reflection of what they had been reading in the New Testament, and burdened by the many social and spiritual needs around them, a good number of the adherents went to street corners and markets openly proclaiming a good news message to any who would listen. This method has been successful and the indiscriminate sharing with any and all who were passing by is reflected in the culturally diverse church that has been planted. Perhaps because of the fragmented society that they engage with, the City Church has a strong emphasis on community with an apparently successful residential discipleship program. However, there seems to have been little

[38] Boutros: "…the New Testament pattern is that when they would meet together they would have someone read the Scriptures and explain. So yeah, and we're also trying to, we're encouraging residents of the center to get up and share Scripture and read Scripture and share just one observation about that. We had that last week. We really don't, as far as I know in terms of scripturally, in the New Testament, we don't really have an order of service that they really did, or you know, how that looked. We know they sang hymns, we know that they studied the Bible together, we know that they prayed together. Those three elements are present."

thought given to the issue of identity, and new members are expected to eventually become part of an existing evangelical church.

- Adoption of Christian identity:

With the eclectic collection of ethnicities and backgrounds, the issues of identity as a community are complex and numerous. However, the City Church leadership encourages all its adherents to take on a Christian identity. Whether this is a stance that has been well thought through or is based on the assumption that a believing community is essentially culturally and socially Christian is open for debate. Certainly the fact that the leadership are all evangelicals from a Middle Eastern Christian background cannot be ignored.

Boutros, in response to the question "how do the attendees describe themselves?" stated:

> They don't call themselves Kurdish Christians or Muslim background Christians, they're just Christians. They've taken off the Islamic religious identity and put a Christian one on that. That's without a sect or denomination. They're non-denominational Christians.

Boulos' response to that question was "believer in Jesus," not "I am still a Muslim" but simply "believer in Jesus."

It could be observed that with such diverse backgrounds of attendees (though the majority are Kurdish Muslims) there was no alternative for a corporate identity other than to declare openly that this church is part of the Christian community and its adherents are Christian. Coupled with the fact that most of those who attend (migrant workers, refugees, etc.) are to some extent dislocated from their social networks and communities, this observation would lend support to this stance on identity.

- Western evangelicalism:

Perhaps in reaction to the perceived negative influence of Western church planting models, the leadership team of the center declares that they have no models or methodology in either their evangelism or church planting.

Ironically, despite the fact that the members of Boutros' leadership team are non-Western,[39] it is clear that they are heavily influenced by Western forms of worship through the evangelical churches that they attend. With no clear strategy or methodology, well-known forms are the ones most readily adopted.

[39] Though all from evangelical churches. There were no believers from Muslim background in leadership at the time of the first interviews.

Boutros describes how their church worship service evolved:

> I think that the people we're involved with…(thought) what are the elements of a service that we should have, and just put it together like that. I think they're just taking the models of what they've seen in the body of Christ and doing the same thing.

The result is a non-liturgical worship service in which the average conservative evangelical in either the Near East or North America (apart from the language) would be comfortable. However, one could question the suitability of such a service for a mix of Kurdish Muslims, Shiite refugees, and Armenian Christian Orthodox. There appears to have been no consideration given to cultural expression in worship and one wonders whether culture is regarded by the leadership as particularly important.

Summary

The interviews described a growing community of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds who share a similar socio-economic level and reside in a poor neighborhood where a ministry center is located. This center is also connected on a leadership level to a number of house churches which are in the same neighborhood. Most members of the house churches also frequent the center.

Boutros, the main leader for the center, sees its role as a "halfway house" paving the way for believers from Muslim background (BMBs) to integrate into the local evangelical community. There is a strong emphasis on personal spiritual mentoring or discipleship. There remains some confusion over the identity of the center itself as the leadership do not want it to be a church (perhaps fearing some ostracism from the wider evangelical community) but clearly many adherents do want it to be their church home. In addition, the successful integration of BMBs from the center into local existing evangelical churches has only happened on a few occasions while the majority are most comfortable at the center or in the house churches.

The model of mission of the center seems to mirror local evangelical outreach with organized times where adherents go out to the streets in the neighborhood to meet strangers and share their faith convictions. The house church outreach tends to be on a more personal, one-on-one basis. Questions can be raised about how these believers from Muslim background, particularly those from societies with little freedom of religion, could actually survive and practice their faith convictions if they were to return to their original communities. A center would most often be difficult to reproduce, particularly in areas where no churches exist. The house church model as practiced by Boulos seems to have greater potential for reproducibility and a more helpful model for them to take "home."

The main influences on both the house churches and the center were primarily the church planters. The New Testament also played a role in the thinking of the leaders according to their understanding and application to their local contexts. The previous experience of the church planters and their desire to remain in the wider evangelical community was also a key influence.

While dealing effectively with community, the question of identity remains a critical one for adherents of the center and the house churches. Because the majority of attendees are not rooted in their home communities, a space has been created for these dislocated people. The goal, it would appear, would be for the adherents to fully adopt a Christian identity. Other issues were raised in the second round of interviews conducted four years later.

The Village Church Network

Introduction

This section summarizes two interviews conducted in late 2012 and early 2013 with a leader of the Village Church network and with a regular attendee. They are identified by the pseudonyms Mahboub and Reem. Mahboub is an Arabic-speaking Middle Easterner in his early forties who is well-educated and is employed full time in a profession other than church planting. Reem is also an Arabic-speaking Middle Easterner in her mid-twenties and is an adherent of one of the house churches. Both Mahboub and Reem were born into Shiite families.

The following description outlines the beginnings and current praxis of the Village Church network, the leadership structure, and the role the house churches play in the wider society. How the attendees describe themselves in the light of their relatively new faith convictions is also described, as are other major influences on the shape of the Village Church network. Some of the outstanding themes are examined in more detail in the common themes section.

Beginnings

- General Overview:

At the time of the first round of interviews the Village Church was a loose collection of seven fellowships that met in homes in a number of different villages. The binding factor was the church planter who began and led all seven of these meetings. The setting was a traditional rural environment among predominantly Shiite Muslims, though one of the groups is among Bedouin Sunni, who are also found in that region. The groups varied in size from extended families to a single one-on-one Bible study in a home. The groups were formed of participants

who were invited by the Bible study hosts and not by the church planter.[40] The seven meetings did not gather or fellowship together as one church. The church planter has stated that this is firstly due to the suspicion that they have of others outside of their family network and secondly so that they do not have a negative influence on each other.[41]

The local population in this part of the country, according to the interviewees, shares a highly social lifestyle with much visiting and much involvement in each other's lives, particularly among the extended family. In fact, it was stated in one interview that if a person did not pay social visits they were regarded by their neighbors as someone quite proud and aloof.[42] The Village Church network seems to have followed this cultural norm and to a certain extent conducted their gatherings like a social visit. Early on in the life of the churches the gatherings were so much like a visit that they struggled to keep spiritual content (particularly Bible study) in the meeting.[43] They then changed the order to focus on inductive Bible study at the very beginning of their time and allow a long time for socializing, discussing problems, politics, etc., after the concentrated Bible time.

The concentrated inductive Bible study time has been highly influenced by the Discovery Bible Study methodology[44] in addition to a strong emphasis on prayer and sharing. The church planter has different members of the group lead the studies with the aim of empowering them,[45] though it would appear that he is still ultimately in charge and will intervene to make sure that pertinent application of what he regards as biblical truth is made by the group. The exception to the use of this methodology is the group consisting of the Bedouin Sunni, who are

[40] Mahboub: "I tell them, you bring people to the group, it's not me bringing them. I don't know who your friends are, I can't bring your friends and sit with you. This is foundational."
[41] Mahboub: "…I didn't…gather them for the reason of fellowship. And there's many reasons. One of the reasons is (that) people are suspicious (of each other) because they don't know each other. The other reason is I want to make sure (that) they encourage each other in a positive way, instead of being a bad influence (on) each other."
[42] Mahboub: "We are with country people. So they still like (it) if you come and visit and talk. They aren't on email or Facebook, not a lot… and they almost think you're proud if you don't come. So our way of working is very traditional – our follow-up is personal, we visit and encourage and are present. We're there if...wife has a baby in the hospital, we're there if you need to talk about something that happened."
[43] Mahboub: "The first challenge I faced was people complaining about the political and the security situation. People were most of the time talking about like their financial difficulties… and it was preventing me from doing the Bible study as it should be. So I start telling them like later we will talk about this but first let's start with the story from the Bible. You understand what I'm saying? Instead of being like the first part pastoral care I did it at the end because it took… almost one hour, one hour and a half, talking about the political situation (and) the financial situation."
[44] For an overview of Discovery Bible Study methodology, see www.internationalproject.org.
[45] Mahboub: "I give (someone) the topic previously, I give him the chapter and story from the Bible. First part is the first third - worship songs, we pray together, we pray in general. Second thing we say who is the person who is responsible today, third thing we review everything that happened the last time. Three parts – worship and praise, who is responsible for the story, third thing we review what happened in the last session. After that that person starts to talk with us in the second part about – he has one third – on the word of the Lord and reads it and lays out the questions related to the verse. I only facilitate this."

illiterate. The church planter visits them every two weeks and shares something from the Scriptures with them, after which they pray and fellowship together.[46]

- How was the gospel first presented?

Similar to the way that he was first introduced to the Christian gospel, Mahboub adopted a conversational way of sharing his faith convictions with the people with whom he already had a relationship. He began by asking questions concerning spiritual matters to family and friends and if interest was shown would then follow up the conversations by giving them a Bible. Mahboub would then ask them to read the Scriptures, stating that the answers to the spiritual questions he was asking were found in the Bible. He believed that if they were interested in the gospel they would then read it, giving more opportunity for further conversation. He would also distribute audio material to those who were illiterate or not comfortable with reading.[47]

Originally Mahboub used the Bible and his conversation partner's reading of it as a litmus test for spiritual interest. He has since discovered that some of his family and friends refuse to read the Bible, not due to lack of interest but mainly because of their aversion to reading any form of written material, religious or otherwise.

Although Mahboub has branched out to sharing with those with whom he is not in a relationship, initially he preferred to focus on those with whom he already had a relationship. His reasoning for this was that if he did not have the credibility with his family and friends to effectively express his faith beliefs then he would need to rethink how he was communicating.[48] Coming from "a very conservative religious and political community" he felt that he had to learn "how to do it with the people I know" with success before sharing with others outside of his network of relationships. In addition, Mahboub also felt a strong call to minister and start house churches among his own people, the people for whom he has a heart.[49] He felt he needed to begin with those closest to him and branch out from there. In fact, this is what he did, having planted five house churches among family and friends and two house churches among those with whom he did not have a previous relationship.

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[46] Mahboub: "There's a Bedouin family that live in the south of Lebanon, they are Sunni Muslim from Near East. I'm sharing this as an answer to your question. So you sit in their tent and there's eight people present, this is a church. And in this church you sit and you share with them the stories of Jesus. They do not read and they don't write. They work in the fields. But I visit this family every two weeks and share stories with them from the Bible."
[47] Mahboub: "(My) two nieces… were (in) first year at the university. I gave them the Bible and I said I'm ready to, you know, to talk about it. To my Mom because she doesn't know how to read and write, I gave audio (Bible)…"
[48] Mahboub: "Because I felt this from God from the first day. If I'm not going to succeed with the people around me, I'm not going to (succeed) with strangers. I felt this from the first day. If my family didn't believe what I'm talking about, it seems (that) I'm facing difficulty to express my faith or the gospel."
[49] Mahboub: "The other reason is from the first day I felt from God is calling me to do house churches among my people. So it was a call from God."

In the interview Mahboub also stated that two important aspects of his gospel presentation were boldness and clarity. He believed that the message was proclaimed boldly in the New Testament and took that as a model for his own way of communicating. This will be discussed further later in the chapter. With regard to clarity, he felt that being clear about the person of Christ, his death on the cross and access to heaven through a relationship with him is critical in an Islamic community which regards Jesus as only a prophet. Clarity, in his opinion, also addressed any suspicion that Mahboub and others were doing something underhanded, trying to establish a secret society, or were proclaiming a message that needed to be hidden. "We are telling people about Jesus, we have to be clear from the first day."

Mahboub outlined the progression from gospel proclamation to group formation. Emphasizing that he was involved in long-term relationships, his goal from the beginning was to begin a Discovery Bible Study in the homes of interested people. His next goal after the Bible study was to see them "believe and receive Jesus."[50] By his estimation this then would eventually lead to baptism. He also aimed to see these new followers develop into effective witnesses to their family and community. Each of the seven groups began in this fashion.

The interviews revealed that there has been comparatively little adverse reaction from the community up until this time regarding the gospel proclamation and then group formation. Mahboub believes that partly this is due to the fact that he was and continues to be an honorable person in society. He states, "From the first day I became a believer - do you know why people didn't treat me badly? Because they know I am a good person in my community."[51]

Description of Contemporary Church Practice

- General description:

Meeting in village homes in rural settings, a typical gathering at that time was most often divided into three parts. Part of the gathering was taken up with sitting and discussing the regular things of life (health, family, finances, politics, etc.) as one would typically do on a social visit in that context. For the first two years this often took place at the beginning of the meeting but Mahboub discovered that this was taking almost all the time set aside for church. He then changed the order of the gathering and began with a more focused time of worship and study which typically lasted for an hour and a quarter to an hour and a half. The study was crafted around the Discovery Bible Study methodology. The passages to be studied were chosen by Mahboub but the study itself was often facilitated by someone else in the group (appointed by

[50] Mahboub: "There are three stages (steps). Firstly believe and receive Jesus, second step get baptized, and the third step witness to others."

[51] Mahboub reveals in the second interview in 2015 that he had a *fatwa* issued against him in 2008. This does not appear to be a factor here in these interviews. In the second interview opposition seems to be more of a concern.

Mahboub from the previous week), who had prepared the material beforehand. Mahboub, who was always present, would sometimes jump in if he felt that a particular application of the passage had not been sufficiently emphasized. Included in this study was a review of the previous week's study. Women who attended the meeting felt free to share openly if they desired. Mahboub stated that prayer often would take up to a third of the time that they gathered, emphasizing the value that they placed on that particular aspect of the Christian life. After prayer, time was then spent discussing possible opportunities to share with friends and relatives. This naturally led into a time of pastoral care, coffee, and fellowship. This was the common practice in most of the houses where Mahboub led the church.[52]

He does describe one meeting that he led among a Sunni Muslim Bedouin family living in a tent. Every two weeks he sat with them, sharing a Bible passage or story and asking questions similar to the Discovery Bible Study methodology. Though there were eight people in this study, Mahboub indicated that he always led. Despite its truncated nature compared to other studies, he still referred to this meeting as a church.

At the time of the interview the churches had begun to practice communion but only those who had been through a six-lesson study on the subject from the New Testament partook. Adherents are baptized but also after taking some time to study the subject with Mahboub. Mahboub was quite adamant in the interview that with both of these sacraments the onus to partake in the Lord's Supper or to be baptized lay with the adherent. Though he would ask them on occasion[53] if they would like to participate, the initial step remained theirs.

- Community life:

Both Mahboub and Reem expressed a strong attachment to the house churches. In Reem's case her attachment is to the small house church that meets in her home, consisting of her, her father, Mahboub, and a foreigner that has helped Mahboub establish the house churches. One would need to ask if this strong attachment is due to the fact that the house church consists of

[52] Mahboub: "More than an hour and a quarter. An hour and a half or more. Concentrated and focused lessons, they want an hour, an hour and a quarter. An hour and a half is a lot. We might do pastoral care, drink coffee, just sit, I'm not concerned, but concentrated and focused about the lesson an hour and a quarter. Because of this I have it in 3 parts, first part is worship and praise, who's responsible today for the lesson, and the review. The second part is the story. The second part is the biggest part, the discussion, 30 to 40 minutes. The last third is who we will share with, who's ready to do the next story, we distribute the responsibility, who wants to prepare. If there is a person who is very shy, I tell them to share. The last thing is teach people how to pray together, how to pray, most of the people they don't know how to pray, how you pray."

[53] Mahboub: "I take them through six lessons from the Bible. My experience is that I don't know when God is going to make them ready for breaking bread, I'm not sure when these people come to faith. Concerning the breaking of bread, I don't do this a lot with the people, those that are a time in the faith, not with someone who came to the Lord yesterday…someone who has experience with the Lord, not a person who just comes and sits with us… it's not me who decides, I wait to see the enthusiasm and anyway people break bread after doing specific studies about it."

her family and friends. However, when she was asked in the interview she stated other reasons for the close ties. She stated that they had the same faith, beliefs and ideas, the same love, and the same concerns.[54]

Mahboub, who attends every group, regards each one of the members of the various house churches as his family.[55] He is very involved in all their lives as will be discussed further on in the chapter.[56] Recognizing the commonality of belief that they share, he does feel also that his close attachment and involvement is really a result of him seeing the fruit of his labor. He states, "…you see the fruit, you say this is the result of the work of the Lord in my life and their lives. Because of this I am feeling….I am part of the family."

- Leadership:

It is apparent that not only has Mahboub started all the groups but also still retains a central leadership position with each gathering. He does have heads of households that would host the meetings and perhaps facilitate the studies on occasion but Mahboub remains the central authority. The way that Mahboub describes his relationship with each of the groups, using the word "father" on occasion, it seems that he has a paternalistic attachment to the groups. Mahboub seems involved in the extended families, particularly in settling family disputes. This may be a personality trait of Mahboub, a reflection of the father role that he assumes or possibly a mixture of both.

- The fellowship's place and role in the wider community:

From the interviews it emerged that the house churches have a very low-key role within the community. It is known by friends, relatives and neighbors that they are studying the Christian Scriptures together, with little overt opposition. Mahboub gave some examples of ostracism and negative reaction at the beginning, apparently toward him rather than toward the family he was studying with, but it appears to have dissipated and Mahboub now feels he is fully accepted by the neighbors.

It was also revealed in the interview that Mahboub, as the leader of these communities, does get involved to a great extent (similar to Raed in the Mountain Church) in the social issues of the

[54] Reem: "I am very at home with this group because (we) share the same faith, same love maybe – like I was sharing before...there is a strong attachment because we share the same ideas, the same concerns we think about – I am strongly attached to this group."
[55] Mahboub: "These are my people. They are my family."
[56] Previously quoted: Mahboub: "We are with country people. So they still like (it) if you come and visit, and talk. They aren't on email or Facebook, not a lot… and they almost think you're proud if you don't come. So our way of working is very traditional – our follow-up is personal, we visit and encourage and are present. We're there if...wife has a baby in the hospital, we're there if you need to talk about something that happened."

people in the house churches. He describes himself as taking a fatherly role with them and speaks of intervening in broken relationships not just within the home group but between the attendees and their extended families or neighbors.[57]

Influences

- The church planter:

The church planter is a male in his early forties born into a Shiite family from a village in the southern region of the country. Well-educated, he was a PhD candidate in International Relations but has discontinued his studies. He still lives and works in the area where he was born and remains officially a Shiite. He does not attend the mosque regularly; before embarking on his present faith journey he regarded himself as a secularist and was not particularly religious. He considers himself an integrated part of his community despite his bold witness to the unique claims of Christ. His church planting efforts are in this region where he was raised, and growth in five of the seven groups has come through his pre-existing relationships with family and friends.

Mahboub states in his interview that someone shared with him about the person of Jesus Christ in 2008. He embarked on a journey of discovery, reading the Bible in a day and a half, and immediately began sharing his newfound faith convictions with family and friends. He has been instrumental in the faith journeys of quite a number of different people in his relational network, including his wife and immediate family who now embrace the claims of Christ. He has a calling to plant house churches among his own people.

- The New Testament:

Throughout the interview Mahboub made many references to the New Testament and saw a number of his ministry practices as having scriptural roots. Clearly a student of the Bible, Mahboub first of all drew parallels between the pattern of his ministry and the pattern he finds in the first church. He believes that when he reads the New Testament a pattern emerges of:

- receive Jesus
- get baptized
- share the gospel with others

[57] Mahboub: "A role of a kind father. A father who has this compassion with them. The example is that there's one house…the girls are working and the money goes into supporting the household. But then the father of the house works and only a little of his money goes into supporting the house and the rest he spends. In the first period I didn't say anything to him at all. I didn't see that it was a suitable time to say anything. But when the daughters came to me and told me about the situation, then I got involved. Also with this other man and his wife, they had a lot of marriage problems and I didn't say anything until the husband came to me and asked me to get involved. Then I got involved."

- start going to other places to share the gospel.[58]

When he reads about the lives of Jesus and the apostles he is struck by what he sees in their boldness and clarity.[59] Particularly citing Peter preaching to the crowd on Pentecost, Mahboub drew attention to the fact that Peter was not only bold but very clear about whom Jesus was. This is a significant example and model for ministry when one is engaging the Shiite community, he believes.[60] Like Paul, Mahboub does not want to compromise the truth[61] and will continue to look for those in his community who respond to his clear message about Jesus. With those who are not really interested in the message of Christ, Mahboub is happy to follow the teaching of Jesus and "shake the dust off your feet" (Matthew 10:14). He looks for what he considers to be the biblical ideal of the "man of peace"(Luke 10:6).[62]

When asked how he defines a person of peace Mahboub responded with:

> In my community, it is the person who has good reputation and….the person who really cares about his family and how about the community is living and…also the person who likes to do something for the people. Why I'm saying all these things because in Muslim shame background you can't plant a church if you have bad reputation, you can't do it.

He believes he can build a ministry around this type of person, and can see them go on and plant their own churches. As seen in the Old Testament he believes that many of the people used of God had good reputations[63] in the community and that people can see how to obey God from one's life. Like the apostle Paul, Mahboub seeks to be a righteous and good person before the community.[64] He believes that the command of Jesus to the woman caught in

[58] Previously quoted: Mahboub: "There are three stages (steps). Firstly believe and receive Jesus, second step get baptized and the third step witness to others."
[59] Mahboub: "When Peter was in the temple, the first thing God used him by the Holy Spirit – firstly he was bold and he spoke to the people in boldness…If Peter didn't have the boldness to preach then he would not have seen 3,000 people come (to faith in Christ)."
[60] Mahboub: "We have to ask God, to pray and say like, 'God, how are you going to use me to gain more people,' and this is the relationship between us and God through the Holy Spirit...it's the same, boldness."
[61] Mahboub: "One of the other points was I saw this characteristic from the Apostle Paul – don't compromise regarding the truth."
[62] Mahboub: "The other thing is to find the man of peace, how do you find the man of peace? And if I found a person who was wasting my time and was really not interested, he just wants to have friends or something, it's just to find the man of peace and who is really interested..."
[63] Mahboub: "Lots of people in the Old Testament had good reputations."
[64] Mahboub: "Another characteristic of Paul, he was a Jew, he was a teacher, a leader, meaning he had a good reputation in the eyes of the people - a righteous, good man before people. I try to be very careful and do the same before people."

adultery “go and sin no more” (John 8:11) is an important principle in church planting and Mahboub urges people to purify themselves.[65]

Interestingly, however, he does not limit his time to sharing with and teaching people of good reputation. Remembering the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), he also follows the example of Jesus to minister to people whom others do not notice.[66] He gives an example of a man who has come to embrace the claims of Christ who also spent five years in prison. Because of this prison time and the resultant stigma that that brings, Mahboub believes the man is limited in his ability to start a house church. Yet because of his spiritual interest, Mahboub believes, according to his understanding of Christ’s example in the New Testament, the man is still worthy of Mahboub’s time.[67]

Confronted with many needs in the community and in some ways in contradiction to Mahboub’s extensive social concern ministry, he has taken inspiration from the apostle Peter’s words to the beggar in the temple, “Silver and gold have I none but what I have I give to you” (Acts 3:1-10), as he states, “Many people have requested help but I just preach the gospel.”

Mahboub does not see much of a parallel between what they actually do in their home groups and what he reads in the New Testament. Though he believes the house churches line up with “the wider plan in the book of Acts and the first church,” he does not see the New Testament as actually affecting the way they do things in the homes.[68]

- Identity:

When asked how the attendees would describe themselves, Mahboub stated that they would use the term “new-born believer in Christ.” He feels that this description best conveys the New Testament verse, “if any man is in Christ he is a new creation; the old things have passed away, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17).

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[65] Mahboub: “There are many places where Jesus encouraged people to purify themselves from certain things – like the woman caught in adultery – I have tried to do the same thing.”

[66] Mahboub: ”Like Jesus visiting Zaccheus when I notice someone that people don’t visit – I visit them – the very poor, or the outcast.“

[67] Mahboub: “With this person he was in jail, he was in prison for more than 5 years, I discipled him but I didn’t see fruit in his life and also in his ministry. Because people – he was taking drugs and he was in jail and even when he declared he’s a new person he faced a lot of difficulties, people to take him as he is. And the people didn’t listen to him - I visit them - the very poor, or the outcast - like the guy who was in prison for 5 years.”

[68] Mahboub: “It doesn’t look much like it, like something found in Acts of the Apostles and the first church, not a lot like it. Because we have more follow-up, we’re more focused on the subject. If you look at the general plan then yes but if you want to take the plan in general, but the details we do them. We plan out the worship, divide the service, decide that we will be doing this kind of study, etc. But the wider plan is all from Acts and the first church.”

Mahboub emphasizes a changed life, saying:

> It's a very important question: what changes have happened in your life when you became a believer? What happened…are you still the same person you were before you accepted Christ or did you change? This is very foundational because if we want to gather…we gather as a group of believers, believers in what? Because Muslim people are saying they're believers.

Hence he prefers the term "new-born believer in Christ." Reem referred to herself as a believer in the interview but did not use the whole term "new-born believer in Christ." Neither Mahboub nor Reem used the term "Christian" though Reem has and does attend an evangelical church in the city on occasion.[69]

When asked how she would describe the house church she attends, she called it a faith community, again avoiding terms (like house church) that would identify it as Christian. She still regards herself officially and in regard to the wider community as Shiite. Mahboub stated that none of the people in the house churches attend the mosque regularly for prayers but of course would still attend funerals, etc.[70] The interview would suggest that the way that the believers describe themselves comes from Mahboub, who takes the lead in this and teaches about it.

It can be observed that generally Mahboub and Reem regard themselves as collectively and socially Shiite but recognize a core belief system that would help them to identify with the Christian community (at least the evangelical wing of that community). This would explain Reem's occasional visits to an evangelical church, especially at the time of a religious feast. However, as she mentioned, of the several churches that she has and could attend (all at least 30 minutes from her village) it is not apparent that she is socially connected to any of those churches. Mahboub also attends an evangelical church on occasion.[71]

- Other Influences:

Throughout the interview Mahboub made reference to the different types of input that has been an influence on the way he has shared the gospel and established house churches. A primary influence has been the missionaries that he has spent time with since embracing the faith claims of Christ. He specifically highlights how certain missionaries modeled for him patience, how to turn a conversation toward spiritual things, and the importance of praying

[69] Mahboub: "Newborn believer and they say like they describe themselves not as Christians, they describe themselves like I'm a believer in Christ according to the New Testament."
[70] Mahboub: "If there's a funeral or something like that, I (participate). I must...you are part of this group."
[71] Gleaned from private conversation with Mahboub.

with people in their homes.[72] Mahboub has been trained in the Discovery Bible Study methodology and uses it in each of the house churches that he leads. He received training in this methodology and was taken by missionaries to Jordan and India to observe firsthand its use in those contexts.[73] This also seems to have had significant influence on how the groups have formed and how they function.

Mahboub's cultural background cannot be ignored in this discussion and it is clear from the interviews that the rural Shiite way of life has a powerful influence on church practice and on the way the gospel message is proclaimed. The manner in which the house church meetings are conducted, similar to a social visit (the common pastime of people in his area) with a Discovery study inserted in the middle, is a good example. Mahboub works hard to retain the spiritual content of these visits, however, not allowing them to revert back to being a social gathering. He states:

> And also I, from the first day…I was praying…God, how can I use (a) good model to establish a community of faith. For example, the first challenge I faced was…people complaining about the political and the security situation. And people were talking about their financial difficulties and it was preventing me from doing the Bible study as it should be. So I started telling them later we will talk about this but first let's start with the story from the Bible. Instead of having the first part pastoral care I did it at the end, because it took…almost one hour, one hour and a half talking about the political situation, the finance situation, and instead of focusing (on)…what they should take from this session.

Strikingly, the influence of the honor/shame value also appears to be a strong factor in the way that Mahboub shares his faith convictions and shapes church practice.[74] He believes he has faced little ostracism, despite his clear testimony about the uniqueness of Christ, because of his "good" standing in the community. He believes that others with bad reputations in the community, despite their faith convictions and even a changed life, could not plant or even host a house church in their homes. As he seeks to grow the number of house churches beyond the seven, he is seeking for persons of peace, essentially honorable people of good standing, to establish these new churches.

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[72] Mahboub: "(I learned) how he turned a question so that the answer could be about Jesus Christ. How to use opportunity to open people (up) to Jesus Christ. He used any opportunity with the person in front of him to speak about Jesus. This is something I learned myself but the second thing how to direct the subject to Jesus Christ this was from C___, and from M___ I learned a lot about patience. The third thing I learned from them was they prayed a lot with people. This is something very important. We can take the opportunity to pray - in every meeting I learned something about prayer."

[73] In response to question about influences: Mahboub: "I was in India, and I was in Jordan…"

[74] For an explanation of the honor/shame value in the Arab world see William Glen Baker, *The Cultural Heritage of Arabs, Islam, and the Middle East* (Dallas: Brown Books, 2003), 21-32.

Summary

The interviews described the formation and praxis of a network of seven house-based fellowships. The majority of the attendees are Shiite and each gathering is based on a family unit.[75] The church planter describes each one as a church irrespective of size and frequency of meeting. Much of the time spent in the gatherings is centered around inductive Bible study with also plentiful opportunity for socializing. There is no singing, something that would attract a lot of attention in a home setting, but the Eucharist is celebrated by some. Mission for the average adherent flows along the natural relational lines found in extended family groupings. Mahboub, however, is actively searching for more opportunities to start new Discovery Bible Studies in homes outside of the social network created by the house churches. The major influences on the shape of the communities appear to be primarily the church planter and the context (rural Shiite villages) in which these communities are birthed. The church planter in turn regards the New Testament and the example set by foreign missionaries as formative in his thinking and ministry praxis. The introduction of the Discovery Bible Study methodology was also influential. How the adherents identify themselves in the light of their new faith convictions, namely as believers in Christ (but not as Christians), is also a significant observation.

The Camp Church Network

Introduction

This section summarizes the interviews that I had with three people working with a small network of house churches among Palestinian Sunni people. The first interviewee, Dexter, is a middle-aged American missionary who speaks Arabic well and leads the missionary team that both first made contact with Mohammed and also continues to work alongside Mohammed and Isa, the other two interviewees. Mohammad and Isa are Palestinian males in their mid-thirties. Dexter was interviewed in December 2011 and Mohammad and Isa were first interviewed in January 2013.

The description addresses the findings from the first round of interviews conducted with the Camp Church network, outlining the beginnings and development of the fellowship as well as the community life and missional engagement with the wider community at the time of the interviews. It also describes what appears to be the major influences that led to its community and missional praxis.

Beginnings

- The missionary team and its strategy:

[75] Similar to the *oikos* model proposed by Lewis. See Rebecca Lewis, "Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24, no. 2 (2007): 75-76.

The missionary team that first came in contact with Mohammed had been working in the region since 1997. It was mainly composed of Westerners, though for a period of time there was a Middle Eastern family (registered evangelicals) that also worked with them.

The leader, Dexter, describes the work in those years:

> In the early days we did a lot of basically meeting people within our relational network (like) neighbors, shopkeepers, and people we were riding in a taxi with. We would share first of all that we were people that were associated with Jesus…then we would try to share part of our testimonies, sometimes stories of Jesus. We would offer to give them a Bible if they were interested in having a conversation. Not to say the work was just to distribute New Testaments and then we were done. That was (just) part of it…we wanted to give people the opportunity of personal interaction with someone who loved Jesus…to dialogue, to answer questions, to share.

Dexter expressed that in the early days of their missionary enterprise their predominant thinking was that they were coming to this area to be a "community of faith…as foreign workers that would share and draw others into our community and then kind of nurture them into being their own community." However, because of team concerns that they would prejudice new believers into church practice that was predominantly Western, they decided to focus on outreach and gospel witness. After three years a number of significant relationships with people who were eager to engage in spiritual conversation were developed and the team started working with them one-on-one. In 2006 one of the team developed a friendship with Mohammed, which was to prove significant for the church plant that was to follow.

- The group formation process:

Mohammed developed a friendship with one of the team as he was applying for a student visa to the USA. The missionary helped him in his application, met him on other occasions, and quickly invited him to his home. Mohammed says that he was impressed with the missionary's kindness and his lifestyle and soon met other people in the team. He knew that they were followers of Jesus and says, "I was feeling that they had something different, something that makes them different."

One of the team members then began to meet with Mohammed regularly for coffee. This was originally a meeting two or three times a week perhaps lasting an hour to an hour and a half at a time and often centered around spiritual themes. These discussions in public, conducted in English, soon developed into a study of the Bible. They would also share problems and pray for each other. Other friends dropped in and out of these studies, but within a month Mohammed embraced the faith claims of Christ. The study settled into a meeting with three regular participants. In 2006, after the outbreak of some intense regional fighting, the foreigner left the

country and the three members of the study stopped meeting. However, it appears that they continued to share with their families the new discoveries they had made about Christ through their study.

Several months later the foreigner returned and renewed his friendship with two of the three men with whom he had previously studied. Both of them strongly desired to restart the meetings and one requested to be baptized, which subsequently took place. Apparently as a result of personal study he had read about baptism and decided that he wanted that for himself.

Within a short space of time Mohammed started to study in his home with his two other friends. He describes this as a cell meeting that then very quickly began to grow. When asked how this cell meeting began, Mohammed stated:

> I felt a great responsibility put on my shoulders. I became a believer and I had a chance to know Jesus and be comfortable with the Lord that takes all burdens away and I felt that the people in my community are really people that suffer a lot. And that maybe or for sure they didn't have the chance to become believers and know what Jesus says. It started like feeling a responsibility to my colleagues first and then to other colleagues who used to join us in the coffee shop while meeting with (this foreigner). I had the chance to know Jesus so I had to just be like a messenger carrying these holy teachings to the people around me who really suffered…

The locus of the study shifted not only geographically but also in respect to leadership, with input but not participation from the foreign missionary workers. The missionaries made a conscious decision to not have any Western expatriates attend the studies, believing that this would prejudicially influence the way that the group would develop. They felt that they needed to give the group time and space to develop their own worship forms.

After studying with Mohammed and being convinced of the claims of Christ, Isa also was then faced with the challenge of communicating his new faith beliefs to his family. According to Dexter, Isa related to him that he placed a New Testament in plain view in his bedroom with a light on it[76] which he used as a first step to signify that a change had begun in his life. He also began to hand out New Testaments to his close friends.

- Growth:

The foreigners continued to meet separately with Mohammed and Isa, who in turn began to meet with other people to study the Bible. That group steadily grew to eight men who were friends either from work or through day-to-day relationships in the camp. The foreigners to this

[76] Something that one might do with the Qur'an.

day continue to meet only with Mohammed and Isa and have a strong relationship with them. There is occasional contact with other members of the groups but this is not consistent and the missionaries would consider the limited contact with other members of the groups as a strategic decision.[77]

In 2009, two other foreign missionaries introduced some inductive Bible study methods and also a simple question-and-answer format that would give some structure to the meeting, outside of Bible study, and help to foster fellowship. Similar to the Discovery Bible Study method that originated out of India, it would appear that the young men and their friends adapted some of that methodology for their own gatherings. Though this appears to be in some contradiction to their earlier stance of non-interference, it seems that Mohammed and Isa both appreciated the help in adopting a simple structure that enabled them to use their time more efficiently.

At the time of the first interview this one meeting of eight men had grown to eight other groups. Though Mohammed did not believe that everyone who attended these groups held to the same faith convictions that he does, he nonetheless termed them "seekers" who want to know the teachings of Christ. One of the groups met in a mosque and was led by an Islamic cleric. That group, which also numbers around eight or so, was attended largely by other Islamic clerics. The leader of the mosque group regularly attended the Friday group hosted by Mohammed.

The groups are still exclusively male. Mohammed and Isa believe that it would be culturally inappropriate for men and women to be meeting together in the informal Bible study setting which the groups have adopted. There are some women that are relationally connected to the network of groups that have accepted the same faith claims of Christ that Mohammed and Isa have adopted, but they do not have mixed gender meetings. All participants continue to identify themselves to family and friends as Sunni Muslim. However, they are clear in their desire to follow the teachings of Jesus. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this section.

[77] Though the foreigners had made a conscious strategic decision to not attend the church meetings as a means of limiting foreign influence, they still saw the importance of introducing the Discovery Bible Study method. This methodology has had a profound influence on the way the meetings are structured and what content is introduced, even down to the formulaic questions that are asked each week. However, freedom is still given to the Camp Church as to what passages from the Scriptures they study, who leads the meetings, and how they interact with each other free from foreigners present. It would also seem from the interview that decisions are made within the group (regarding charitable giving, for instance) and are free from foreign intervention so far. Another significant influence, it appears, has been the teaching introduced by one of the foreigners around the subject of "strategic" prayer, which Mohammed believes has been quite beneficial.

- Contemporary church practice:

  Cell group praxis

The group meeting appears to be structured similarly to a cell or a Qur'anic study found in the mosque. The meeting that is hosted in one of the Camp Church leader's home begins with the customary tea and informal greeting and sharing. The official meeting then begins with each participant in turn sharing about something that they are thankful to God for over the previous week and something that is troubling them. The rest of the group rejoices in the good that has happened and offers help, advice, etc., for the issues that are troubling the participant. Time is then spent in prayer relating to the time of sharing. The group then goes on to a period of inductive study where a passage is read out loud to the rest of the group and a series of questions (the same each week) are asked of the text. Each participant shares his answers to these questions. The participants have been assigned readings from the previous week that are the topic of discussion and have been studied by the participants before attending the meeting. This inductive study is then followed by a time of sharing lessons learned from the text and what personal application needs to be made from those lessons. Time is also spent sharing about the results of the previous week's lesson and if the participant was faithful in his application. Each participant also answers questions such as "whom did you share with?" and "how did the people that you shared with react?"[78] On occasion a time of worship is conducted by the reading of hymns and spiritual songs and Psalms. They do not sing.[79] On occasion they also share "pictures"[80] that they believe they may have received from God that would be an encouragement to the rest of the group. At the time of interviewing, they did not celebrate communion but periodically offerings were taken for the poor and the needy. Both Mohammed and Isa consider the strong emphasis on Bible study to be essential. Mohammed explains, "It is the bread that we live on because without it we are nothing - it's the gas that you put into your car, you need to refuel your car - I tell you it's like oxygen in your blood."

[78] Mohammed: "Then we ask questions like 'Whom did you share with?' and 'How did the people that you shared with react?' Also 'How did the part that we studied affect your life?' and 'What did you apply from the things that we learned?' because when we read we put into practice and we do this for the whole part that we studied. We do five verses, then five verses, then five verses until we finish the whole chapter. Then we… ask the questions…what did you have during the week? (What) was good? (What) was bad? - as everyone of us has in mind the problems that so-and-so had or the other guy and so we want to pray for them so we go around and we ask him what we can pray for and then we pray for us as a community and then for each one of us individually."

[79] Mohammed: "Sometimes we glorify God, worship…with a hymn, like 'You are Great' and others that we have on a sheet of paper...we read them out loud."

[80] That is, a mental image. Mohammed: "First we read the whole passage, then we go into details. The head of the study will read, say, the first five verses and ask, 'What does this mean to you?' 'What do you want to share to us about this passage?' We all share but each person may be sharing something different. Then we see what we learn – what God tells you and with whom to share with these things later. Then we ask if anyone has (a) picture to share, if God has spoken to them (from that week's passage)."

- Community life:

Mohammed and Isa feel strongly attached to the group and see that giving time for each of the participants to share about themselves, their families, and their concerns is a great tool in fostering unity and community. Isa feels there is great strength in the community and, in typical Bedouin style,[81] illustrated this by sharing a story of a man who taught his sons the strength of unity by asking them to break one stick and then giving them a bundle of sticks and asking them to break that, which they could not do. Part of this strength, in Isa's opinion, is reflected in the way that they are able to help each other solve problems, each offering support, possible solutions, and prayer. He feels his commitment to the group is in obedience to Christ's command to love one another as he has loved us (John 13:34) which also reflects his emotional attachment.[82] Most of the church (or churches) is made up of people who were friends before joining the group or who have formed relationships with each other through work or the mosque.

- Leadership:

Mohammed also expressed that he feels great responsibility not only for the original eight members of the first group but also for the leaders of the groups that have come out of that first fellowship. He expressed his wish that there were more hours in the day so that he could visit and look after them more. Describing himself as a shepherd, he shares of his concern for them, how he worries about them, and prays for them. Yet he also shares his joy (which he describes as an "eternal joy in Jesus") in being part of the group and also being one of the leaders. He compares his emotions and satisfaction with a farmer working his field and finding "joy in the harvest."

Though it would appear that Mohammed and Isa have a strong influence on the group, it does seem that decisions are made on a consensual basis. Dexter, who does not attend the meetings, confirms this when he states that they wrestled with issues using the Scriptures, discussion, and then came to a group decision. He states, "I don't know if there's one or two that often influence those decisions but it sounds like when they give feedback they always talk about it as 'we,' the brothers all felt like this was something that 'we' wanted to do." It is interesting to note that the cleric who has started six groups chose the leaders for those groups himself. Mohammed and Isa are in contact with those leaders, and, as expressed previously, Mohammed feels some responsibility for them, but does not appear to be an authority over them. This is a flat structure not seen in the mosque but is very similar to the structure

[81] Isa is from a Bedouin family.
[82] Isa: "…We feel strongly attached, for the final words that Jesus said was to love one another as he has loved us."

encouraged by the Discovery Bible Study methodology. The nine groups at present do not meet with each other.

- Mission:

The interview would indicate that Mohammed, Isa and the rest of the men in the groups remain accepted as Palestinian Sunni Muslims by family and friends (see the section on Identity). Though met with confusion and suspicion at times, Mohammed testifies that he remains firmly rooted within the network of relationships into which he was born and raised. He explains:

> …at first it was kind of something weird, they had the wrong impression, but later… As it happened with me the people around you see the change, they see like how you deal with them and they see your behavior and your actions, they start to change their (opinion).

Similarly to the testimonies of the believers in the other churches, Mohammed attributes the present acceptance of his belief in Jesus by close family and friends to a favorable change in his behavior.

He states:

> …When I became a believer, we did something strange in a Muslim community for one of the family members to be a believer in Jesus. But later when my family members, especially my mom (she's an old traditional Muslim woman), started seeing the change in me she started accepting that. Not only accepting that but loving my friends who are believers.

He continues:

> First…my family had a (strong aversion to) Jesus but then when they saw the change in me, when they saw me sacrificing myself for them, wearing myself out worrying about their problems…it made them see what it means to believe.

Isa also shares about the positive impact of a changed life. Not only did he give testimony to an ongoing behavioral change (particularly in the area of losing his temper), garnering favor among family and friends, but also related an amusing anecdote. Rather than share openly with his family about his newfound faith, he began to clean up around the house and help his wife and mother with household chores. This rather uncharacteristic (and apparently countercultural) behavior left the family stunned but also created a platform for deeper discussion.[83]

[83] Isa: "When I told some of them that I had become a believer the response was that this was an unacceptable point of view – why do you say these things? With my wife, I showed her some verses from the Bible…even with my wife I can't put pressure on her. When I spoke to my family they observed the change in my life. I used to be

- The fellowship's role in the wider community:

The Camp Church sees itself as having a very strong role in bringing the teachings of Christ to the suffering Palestinian Muslim community. Describing themselves and their church as the "nucleus of salvation,"[84] *nawwat alkhalas*, Mohammed and Isa believe in their mission and practice clear proclamation of their convictions. It would appear that this belief and commitment to mission is also shared with most if not all of the others in the Friday group. This is evidenced in the other Bible study groups that have been formed and also the occasions where a more public proclamation has been undertaken.

Dexter shared a story in the interview of a Friday group adherent, a religious cleric, being invited to speak at a large political rally. Because of their history and the suffering that the Palestinian people experienced and still continue to experience, the other speakers at the rally focused on the realization of political aspirations through violence. The Friday group member, on the other hand, centered his speech on the themes of forgiveness and reconciliation as found in the teachings of Jesus. This speech sparked off interest in other religious teachers as well as further discussions, leading to the eventual formation of more home groups at that time.[85]

The Camp Church did not restrict its engagement with the wider community to just evangelism. On a weekly basis members of the Friday group traveled to another Palestinian camp located several hours away to help families in need. The need has been particularly exacerbated due to the current regional crisis, where Palestinians are fleeing their camps and sheltering in several countries in the region. Going as Muslim Palestinians doing relief work, they have been able to help families with basic shelter, needs for winter, and some foodstuffs.

Mohammed shares:

> It started like a kind of relief work, helping these people… We cannot isolate (divorce) the relief work from spiritual work, from Jesus' teachings, because one of Jesus'

very angry. I started to do things for myself - I would clean up and do the dishes in the kitchen - I did this - it was no problem for me.

[84] Isa: "I want to comment about this name, the nucleus of salvation, because every one of us in the group is preaching and carrying the teachings that we already have to save the people around us. The religious teachers are doing this, we are doing this…all of us are leading the community to salvation."

[85] Dexter: "Well, I think it said a lot that one of the guys was asked to share at a political rally a couple years ago about events that were happening in our region. I think it was the Gaza invasion, and he really felt that he should share a different perspective than what was being spoken about in that political meeting. So he did, he shared some of the principles of love and forgiveness that he'd been learning from Jesus, and that sparked an interest from two religious teachers to meet with him, to study with him, and these guys have kind of started their own study and group within their actual communities based on the time that they've had with him. So, I think people are seeing in the wider community that there is some true faith going on and some different answers than they've been finding."

> teachings is to help the people…around us. So that was a kind of chance to share with the people about Jesus and to show them the right path.

Their compassionate acts of help for the poor were in stark contrast to the indifference that others had toward the camp.[86] This led to deep personal relationships but also an exploration of the motivation behind the churches' charitable acts.

Mohammed continues:

> We started going there and doing (relief) like they were brothers and sisters in another Palestinian community…we're from the same community and have the same problems. First, they saw us as sharing their problems as Palestinian refugees and having a heart to help but later they knew that behind this love is Jesus.

As the relationships deepened and the teachings of Christ were further explained, more Bible study groups were established in this other camp. At the time of the interview a further six groups had been established.

Influences

- The church planter:

The original Bible study in the coffee shop was initiated with Mohammed by a foreigner from the UK. Other foreign missionaries from both Great Britain and the USA have also had significant influence on the formation of the Camp Church groups; however, in my assessment, the main church planter is Mohammed. He is a single Palestinian man in his early 30s, educated and works as a schoolteacher to Palestinian children. He was born and raised a Sunni Muslim and continues to identify himself as such, though clearly testifies that he is a follower of the teachings of Jesus. He knows the Qur'an well and in my interview with him gave the impression of also having a good grasp of New Testament knowledge. Apart from being a student of the New Testament since 2005, he also spent the first five years of his early education at an evangelical school. He remembers with fondness the Bible lessons that were given on a Thursday afternoon in chapel and it appears that the knowledge that he gained at that time still remains with him in his adulthood. This created a favorable base for his studies of the New Testament, both in the coffee shop and in his home. He is baptized.

Born and raised in a refugee camp, the empathy and concern that he has for his suffering people is clearly a motivator for Mohammed. Through the teachings of Jesus, Mohammed believes he has found comfort and hope and clearly seeks to replicate the means, that is the

[86] Mohammad: "We went to that area at a time when everyone around them was ignoring them - they seemed to be isolated, no one getting involved."

Bible study, by which he discovered life-changing truths. As a teacher by profession, teaching the "good news" is a natural method for him which, significantly, was also modeled to him by missionary friends.

It is also interesting to note that the kindness shown to him by Westerners (in this case particularly by an American) was also a significant factor in Mohammed seeking to discover more about these people, and, in turn, the teachings of Jesus. The fact that they were followers of Jesus was not an obstacle for him. This could perhaps be attributed to the exposure that he received in his early years at the evangelical school. To a long-term refugee, these acts of kindness were impactful and attractive. As will be shown later, the way that Mohammed and the others live out their faith convictions is strongly influenced by this hermeneutic.

- The Christian Scriptures:

In the interviews with Mohammed and Isa no reference was made to the New Testament as a specific model for gospel witness, discipleship, and church formation. However, it is clear that Mohammed and Isa draw much inspiration from the New Testament in their church practice. Not only do they consider Bible study to be an essential and life-giving part of their worship, but they also see the development of community as having New Testament roots. As an example, when asked the reasons behind questions like "what are you thankful for?" and "what's bothering you?"[87] rather than referencing the DBS methodology, Mohammed instead stated, "All of us are like different organs in the body of Christ…we pray for each other and we share our problems together." Dexter also communicated in his interview that on the issue of collecting a weekly donation for the needy the group examined what was written in the Bible and from that basis came to a decision. The impression that one gets from the interviews is that the Christian Scriptures are very influential in their church practice.

In the interview with Dexter some reference is made to the New Testament pattern of mission and church planting in response to specific questioning about that area. He does not regard what they did as the "high-level apostolic moving from place to place fairly quickly type of work that we see Paul or Barnabas or others doing." Rather he believed that they were modeling the long-term relational witness more in line with the "exhortations found in many of the epistles about living out your faith before those around you and being ready to give an answer to those who observe your lifestyle."

- Other influences:

Dexter felt strongly that the group needed to remain relationally and culturally in their society. Dexter felt his life experience and that of his team were not particularly helpful as they engaged

[87] Standard questions found in the Discovery Bible Study method.

the camp community and other people in the city, and as they sought to plant a church among them. He states that so many of his previous church plants were "Western-style small groups within an already-established community of faith." However, he does describe being influenced by books like "The Insider,"[88] as well as by several key people in Dexter's foreign mission agency,[89] notably John Travis[90] and Rebecca Lewis, who through research and experience have established themselves as key influences in that agency. Dexter feels "that (they) have done a lot of research and study and working through a lot of the initial definition of working with insider movements. So we were heavily influenced by their experience and by their sharing what had been happening in their part of the world." At present, according to the testimonies given, the houses churches are perceived as groups of Palestinian Sunni men who gather to study the life and teachings of Jesus. With foreigners attending the meetings in the houses many questions could be raised as to the presence and intentions of outsiders and seriously challenge the concept that these men are "insiders" following Christ from within their community.

Clearly the Discovery Bible Study method from India has also been a significant influence in shaping the structure and content of the weekly gatherings as well as making a significant impact on growth and reproduction. The leading question format designed to foster open sharing of problems and successes has, as well as enabling the participants to engage the Scriptures inductively, crafted a space where instruction, accountability, fellowship, and witness are practiced on a peer-to-peer basis. This was not the initial structure of the group or format of the gatherings. According to Mohammed the original meetings were quite random both in timing and in content but the present structure of the meetings was adopted three years before the interview, after being introduced to them by one of the Westerners.[91] Another area which was introduced by the Westerners is outlined by Mohammed who says:

> It went (beyond) the Bible study to more spiritual things like strategic prayer, like when we had problems that affected all our community, Palestinian community like here or in Gaza. We had times that we spent together that were really good times - efficient, effective times – and all the brothers felt the importance of strategic prayer. This came from our brother ___. He was the one who provided us with details and documents that helped us on how to (do) strategic prayer.

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[88] Jim Petersen and Mike Shamy, *The Insider: Bringing the Kingdom of God into Your Everyday World* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2003).

[89] The name is excluded for security reasons at the request of the interviewee.

[90] Travis, the creator of the C1 – C6 scale, is an advocate for believers from Muslim background being encouraged to remain both socially and religiously in their original context. See John Travis, "The C1-C6 Spectrum after Fifteen Years," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2015): 358-365.

[91] Mohammed: "We started in a random way but then we learned by practice and the help of the brothers (missionaries) how to get it more organized…the way we do it now."

The Discovery Bible Study (DBS) method seems to have had some influence on not only the structure (and possibly the size) of the first group but also on the subsequent formation and leadership of the proceeding groups. The DBS method encourages a flat relational structure rather than a hierarchy as seen in a mosque or traditional church.

- Identity:

It is clear from the interviews that both Mohammed and Isa regard themselves as Palestinian Sunni Muslims. They were both born into this community and continue to maintain an extensive, long-term network of relationships of family and friends from the same. It would appear from Mohammed and Isa's testimonies that the other members of the groups also share the same sense of belonging. Mohammed, when asked if he would ever identify himself as a Christian, quickly and emphatically described that label as problematic,[92] preferring the term "follower, or believer in Isa."[93] This term is used while maintaining their identities as Muslims.

Not only do they see themselves as Muslims but this identification also appears to have an effect on their faith expressions. They meet on Fridays after evening prayers in the mosque (as opposed to the more traditional Sundays), they are more comfortable using Islamic terms to describe Jesus, faith, etc., than the terms found in the Arabic translations of the Scriptures. Mohammed and Isa also have little problem with the clerics remaining in the mosque leading prayers and preaching while also claiming to be followers of Jesus.

The question could be asked if the desire to be seen as Muslims restricts the way they do church. This is seen most obviously in the strict social separation between male and female. Perhaps in deference to the mosque model where males and females worship separately, an undesired result has been the non-existence of female Bible study circles despite some interest from wives and relatives. At the time of the first round of interviews there were no female leaders of these groups.

Their collective identity as Palestinians may also have an effect on their outreach into the community.[94] It is interesting to note that their service to the less fortunate is restricted to the Palestinian Sunni community. Despite the large numbers of refugees that have moved across the region over the last several years, Mohammed and Isa and their group limit their acts of service to Palestinian refugees that have fled from a recent regional conflict. Another indicator

[92] Mohammed: "If you use words that they are unfamiliar with - the community - they will distract people and keep people away so that's why I call myself a Jesus follower – not a Christian. if you say 'Christian' then there is quite a misunderstanding."
[93] Qur'anic name for Jesus Christ.
[94] Green uses Benjamin Bait-Hallahmi's conceptualization of three different levels or layers of identity. He defines a "collective identity" as an identity defined by a particular group. See Tim Green, "Conversion in the Light of Identity Theories," in *Longing for Community*, ed. David Greenlee, Kindle edition, chapter 5.

that reinforces their collective identity as Palestinian was highlighted in the interview around the subject of strategic prayer. Mohammed spoke of this new development in the group but appeared to indicate that their acts of intercession centered mainly around the Palestinian community and the social and political issues that they face.[95]

On the core identity level the interview reflects an interesting perspective.[96] Though clearly seeing themselves as within Islam they also see that something new and different has happened to them. Each of them has undergone a personal process where they have, often over time, embraced the teachings of Christ and the ensuing value system formed by those teachings. This is evidenced by the story of the cleric who addressed the Palestinian political rally on the peacemaking teachings of Jesus, a story applauded by the Camp Church. Though rooted in the Palestinian Muslim community, he spoke out of his core identity as a follower of Jesus. This curious blend of collective Muslim identity and core follower of Jesus identity also is reflected in the phrase they would use to describe themselves: "nucleus of salvation." It seems to indicate a belief that they are starting small but also from the inside, rather than the outside coming in, and have a new message to communicate. They are insiders that will bring salvation to their people.

By continuing to identify themselves with the Palestinian Sunni Muslim community, holding to the value system passed down to them as it conformed to their understanding of biblical values, the Camp Church members have managed to negotiate a place for themselves within their network of family and friends. Where many other Christ-followers from Muslim background have been ostracized and even in some cases attacked physically,[97] this church has for this present time remained an accepted part of their immediate community. It would appear that as they remain community insiders the challenge of Christ's claims that they present is not immediately understood as a competing religion or ideology from the outside and perhaps not as readily perceived as threatening. The groups meet around the Scriptures to study about the life of Christ and his commands. In one sense there are no identity markers that would make them be understood as Christian (for instance communion, though some have been baptized quietly). It would seem that they are perceived as religious men who are interested in the teachings of the Prophet Isa. This has allowed them some space to grow and reproduce. In addition, the adherents are living exemplary lives of service and sacrifice to their families and

[95] Mohammed: "I am going to tell you something more - it went from the Bible study to more spiritual things like strategic prayer. Like when we have problems that affected all our community - Palestinian community like here or in Gaza - we had times that we spent together that were really good times, effective times, and all the brothers felt the importance of strategic prayer."

[96] Green uses Benjamin Bait-Hallahmi's conceptualization of three different levels or layers of identity. He defines "core identity" as the identity defined by answering this question, "Who am I in my inner self?" See Green, "Conversion," in *Longing for Community,* Kindle edition, chapter 5.

[97] This has been well documented in many places. See the City Church sections in this study as an example.

the wider community. Rather than being seen as radicals on the fringe of society, it appears that they are seen as good sons and brothers to their families, good friends and colleagues to others, and good Palestinians to the community. Their behavior to some extent is validating the teachings of Christ.

Summary

In summary, from this first round of interviews a description was given of how the missionary team first made contact with two of the now main leaders of the Camp Church network. By adopting a "hands off" approach, this missionary team gave space for Mohammad and Isa to grow and develop a number of loosely-connected house churches in the Palestinian refugee camps. After adopting the DBS methodology, weekly meetings were established in a number of locations under local leadership. These groups appear to be heavily influenced by the church planters (in this case Mohammad and Isa) but also by the Scriptures and the DBS methodology. Their missional practice is highly relational but clear regarding the teachings of Christ. How the adherents regard themselves (i.e. as Muslims who follow Isa) also has an effect on how they do mission and on the shape of their community, although it is clear that many have come to see themselves as committed followers of Isa. It would appear they are still regarded as Muslims by the wider community, albeit with a peculiar interest in the teachings of the Prophet Isa.

Interview Analysis: Common Themes and Questions

The Purpose of the Interviews

This first round of interviews was conducted over a 12-month period in settings of the interviewees' choosing in the Near East. The interviews were all conducted by me personally, in English or Arabic (or both), depending on the preference of the interviewee. All interviews were recorded, with the permission of the interviewee. The first round of interviews was undertaken with the intent to explore how these different fellowships began and to discover something of their story. What do they do when they gather and why do they do what they do? Do they have missional convictions and, if they do, how are those convictions expressed? Another question that arose was concerning the extent to which, in their community or mission praxis, they used the New Testament (if at all) as a source by which suitable contemporary patterns in both of those areas could be developed. Were there other influences? And, finally, how do they see themselves in relation to the rest of society?

Apart from the fascinating and unique accounts of the beginnings of each fellowship, an idea of the praxis of the different congregations and some of the underlying reasons and motivations as to why they did this in a certain way was gleaned. Common themes began to emerge.

Praxis

Worship rituals

It would appear from the interviews and in two instances from my observations as a participant observer that each of the fellowships borrowed most, if not all, of their worship rituals from another context. The City and Mountain Churches adopted a structure and style of conducting their gatherings highly similar to, and in most cases identical to, local evangelical churches found in the Near East today. I was privileged to be a participant observer at both of these churches. In the case of the City Church the services mirror evangelical services, even down to the style of music and the use of modern instruments, possibly with the hope that the attendees could more readily integrate into evangelical services in the future and possibly due to the comfort of the church planters. In the case of the Mountain Church, in addition to the evangelical pattern, they have added roundtable discussions after the sermon which would not be found in an evangelical service but is reminiscent of a *khulwa* or *majlis* found in Druze communities.[98] The Village and Camp Church networks have adopted the Discovery Bible Study format as integral to their regular worship gatherings.

[98] A gathering to discuss matters of importance, particularly regarding the community or instruction for new initiates. Both terms are also used to describe the place where these gatherings take place. See Fuad Khuri, *Imams and Emirs: State, Religion and Sects in Islam* (London: Sami Books, 2007), Kindle edition, chapter 15.

None of the groups from Muslim background had retained overtly Islamic forms of worship (such as the ritualized prayer forms or *rakat*)[99] which we have seen in other Muslim settings,[100] and the groups seem content to borrow or adopt worship forms from other contexts. The same appears to be true of the Druze.

Forming community

From the outside an individual group in the Camp Church network would look a lot like the Qur'anic home studies that occur in their community.[101] They are small, single-gender gatherings centered on the study of a holy book (in this case the teachings of Nabi Isa or the prophet Jesus found in the injil) which take place in homes. The Camp Church network seems to have adapted this understood, and in consequence possibly less threatening, acceptable social form for their groups. This would not be perceived by the wider society as a church.

The Village Church network, in contrast to the Camp Church, formed faith communities around households. All participants in each gathering are closely related to each other. This enabled them to overcome the social stigma of having male and females meet together, as obviously close family can mix socially. The seven gatherings, incorporating the DBS format, appear to take on the form of a social visit with lots of tea and plenty of chatting before and after the time of study and sharing. Group leadership too mimics the household with the male heads of households acting as host and leader. It is a possibility that society looking from the outside sees the groups as people (followers of Jesus) that visit each other and talk about the *Nabi Isa* and not as a religious service.

The City Church community, which, interestingly, at the first round of interviews had leadership who were not from the same socio-religious community as the congregation, seems to have accepted the same structure of a voluntary association that local evangelical churches have adopted and that is common among evangelical churches in North America.[102] Leadership would also function in accordance with this paradigm.[103] They would most likely be perceived by the rest of society as having left their religion (Sunni Islam) and joined another.

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[99] Chawkat Moucarry, *Faith to Faith: Christianity & Islam in Dialogue* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 116.
[100] See John Travis, "Messianic Muslim Followers of Isa: A Closer Look at C5 Believers and Congregations," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17, no. 1 (2000): 53-56, and J.D. Woodberry, "To the Muslim I Became a Muslim?" *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 24, no. 1 (2007): 23-28.
[101] For a fascinating description of one Qur'anic study among women, see Karen L.H. Shaw, "Affective Barriers and Bridges," (D. Min. thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2008), 131-135.
[102] Daniel L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 84.
[103] For a fuller description of the voluntary association as a church expression see Craig Wilson and Gene Ott, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 114-116.

The Mountain Church community, while adopting evangelical church rituals, has also adapted the social structure of the extended family or clan as something around which they could form community. Unfettered by the stricter religious and social mores of the Sunni or rural Shiite communities, the Mountain Church, consisting of people from different families and villages, meets publicly in a central location and would be regarded by outsiders as a church. However, beyond the meeting they are seeking to create a new family grouping in the wider society and function relationally in that paradigm.[104] Leadership is patriarchal, similar to the clan.

Community formation will be explored more thoroughly in the chapter "Conversations Between Muslim Voices in Context and the Early Church Movement" but is mentioned here as a common trend. All the communities were happy to borrow worship rituals and styles from other contexts but those churches whose leadership shared a common socio-religious background to the majority of their congregations sought, consciously (in the case of the Mountain and Village Churches) or unconsciously (as it appears in the case of the Camp Church), to adapt an appropriate social or religious structure to better foster community.

Mission

It was a common theme that a high percentage of each congregation or network of home groups was committed to expressing and demonstrating practically their faith beliefs to the society around them. How each church undertook mission to the wider society has been described in the previous chapter and it would appear to correlate closely with the way that the interviewees first engaged the gospel and how mission was modeled to them. Some of the core convictions of the church planter (e.g. the high value that Raed places on relationships or the compassion that Mohammed has for suffering people) appear also to have a strong influence on how the rest of the congregation engages society missionally. Obviously the context modified the style of mission in each congregation (e.g. engaging people on the street with the City Church and home Bible studies with the Village Church) but the sense of calling was a common theme.

Motivations

The answer to the question "why do the churches do the things they do?" is obviously complex, but common factors emerged in each interview. Common factors were the church planter's influence, the attitude of the church to the predominant religion of the community, and the influence of society, particularly in the areas of identity and how the wider community regarded the new church. These issues are dealt with in more detail in the following section.

[104] As Druze often marry their cousins, the same social rules would apply to opposite sex interaction as in any gathering in Druze society. Appropriate behavior is maintained. See Kamal Salibi, ed., *The Druze: Realities and Perceptions* (London: Druze Heritage Foundation, 2005), 60-76.

Church planter's influence

The values and convictions of the church planter in each context appeared to have significant influence on the adoption of worship rituals and praxis, the appropriation of cultural models for community formation, and the form and method of mission.

Attitude to the predominant religion of the community

As one would expect, the attitude to the interviewees' former religion was a common theme. This also appeared to be strongly influenced by the church planter and his convictions but, notably, different church planters and in consequence the churches they planted viewed Islam or the Druze religion in different ways. The congregations' attitudes could be summarized in one sentence statements as follows:

- City Church
  In the light of our new faith we reject Islam and want to be identified as Christian.
- Village Church network
  In the light of our new faith we reject Islam but we want to remain Shiite and continue to live in our communities.
- Mountain Church
  In the light of our new faith we reject the Druze religion but we want to remain Druze and continue to live in our communities.
- Camp Churches
  We don't reject Islam in its entirety. Rather, we redefine aspects of Islam in the light of our new faith. We want to remain Muslim and continue to live in our communities.

This in turn influenced their praxis in both community formation and in their witness to family, friends, and the wider society.

The influence of society

Identity. Intrinsically connected to the previous point is the common theme surrounding issues of identity. The question is "who am I (and who are we) now that I have embraced these new faith convictions?" How the leaders and attendees answered that question appears to be an important factor in determining their community formation and missional praxis.

Attitude of the predominant religion of the community. Another common factor that contributed to the worship praxis and patterns of mission in each church was the reaction of the surrounding community to the different congregations. Woven into each story reflected in the interview was the account of how the interviewee's message of new faith was received, how family relationships were maintained or broken, and how restoration came, if needed. How the interviewees negotiated (or not) their place

among their family, neighbors, and friends and, by extension, the place of the congregation in society was a major factor in their community expression and model of mission.

Critical Questions

As the interviews explored the what, how, and why of community praxis and the patterns of mission, a series of fundamental questions came to light that were being asked and in some cases answered by each of the new church expressions. Many of the interviews reflected the internal debate that these emerging congregations held (at least at leadership level) as they wrestled with issues like identity, community, and mission.

Questions that arose, either explicitly or implicitly, out of the interviews could be expressed in the following examples:

- Now that I have embraced the faith claims of Christ, what do I call myself, what is my identity?
- Now that I have embraced these faith convictions, in what ways does this now define my relationship with family, friends, and the wider community?
- What is my relationship to Christianity and the traditional Christian community?
- What is my relationship to Islam or the Druze religion?
- What is my relationship with these other people who also share my faith convictions?
- How do we meet? What do we do when we meet?
- How do I conduct myself in my home and in society?
- How do we witness – what do we say? How do we represent ourselves?

Summary

In summary the first round of eleven semi-structured interviews was conducted between late 2011 and early 2013, with the majority given in 2012. Seven of the interviewees were church leaders, with the remaining four being adherents. The interviewees were asked questions regarding the establishment of the fellowship (or network of fellowships), their worship praxis at the time of the interviews and their missional engagement in the surrounding community. New subjects for exploration emerged, particularly in the areas of identity, the church planter's influence, and the churches' posture with the majority religion of their birth community. These new findings also informed the questions used to explore different aspects of the formation and development of the early churches in the apostolic age.

Early Church Voices

Introduction

This section proposes a limited description of the early church movement in the apostolic period. As the subject area is substantial with a multitude of differing expert opinions, I have restricted this section to the main issues raised by the four emerging churches from the initial interviews. These were mainly in the areas of community formation and establishment, mission praxis, and how the early church saw themselves and the wider society around them. Before the description of the early church movement, the question of the legitimacy of bringing the early churches into critical conversation with the new Near Eastern fellowships is addressed and reasons presented as to why I have chosen this path of research. The observations gleaned from the early church description contributed significantly to the questions asked in the second round of interviews.

Why Look at the Early Church Movement in the Apostolic Period?

The question can be asked: "What does the early church movement have to do with fellowships among Muslim communities in the Near East?" As will be demonstrated in the next chapter**,** the historical churches of the first century were a small network of diverse yet connected fellowships scattered mainly throughout the Mediterranean world. They faced opposition in various forms and from different fronts. They formed new communities and a new identity**,** yet still retained to varying degrees a connection to their Jewish roots.[1] Despite these new communities and identities, they remained engaged with the wider society, being compelled by their conviction as to the universal efficacy of their faith and their calling to make "disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:18-20). Despite difficulties, the early church movement not only survived but increased numerically, spread geographically, and grew, over time, to have considerable influence.[2]

Interestingly, there are some striking parallels between the early churches and the new emerging fellowships in Muslim communities in the Near East region. These small Near Eastern churches, consisting of members from Muslim and Druze religious and cultural backgrounds, are also facing much opposition from a society that similarly regards them with suspicion and disdain. The adherents are asking fundamental questions about their identity now that they have embraced new faith claims about Christ (claims different from those held by their families

[1] Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson, *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 7.
[2] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3-7.

and neighbors), while they simultaneously wrestle with issues of community, mission, and worship. Like the early churches, they too are experiencing a period of significant numeric growth, particularly among the Palestinian, Kurdish, and Shiite populations.

Obviously it would be naïve to ignore the contextual differences between the early churches and the new emerging communities of the twenty-first century, differences not only chronological but also cultural, linguistic, social, religious, etc. It is not the intention of this study to suggest in any way that the early church movement praxis is prescriptive for all churches in all places for all time or that a carte blanche transference of first century methodology is the recommended path for even these churches in the Near East today. However, an examination of how these early churches dealt with opposition, understood and undertook mission, formed community, and how they regarded themselves in the light of their newfound faith is valuable fuel for numerous conversations with contemporary believers from Muslim and Druze background facing somewhat similar challenges. To borrow an analogy from Hesselgrave, architects study the designs of past masters to learn, even though they do not intend to reproduce carbon copies of their work.[3] In Case Study research, social scientists will point to the "relatability" of a specific case being examined.[4] By "relatability" they mean the possibility of other contexts finding enough areas of similarity to engage in meaningful and helpful dialogue and application. This would contrast with attempting to find identical cases before the conversation begins or attempting to limit the search to discovering generalizations that are applicable to all contexts. I would suggest that the early church movement offers ample opportunity for contemporary churches in the Levant to discover areas of "relatability."

It would be possible to undertake a comparative study with contemporary churches among Muslim communities situated in another geographical location such as Egypt or Algeria**.** This would be valuable research; however, I have chosen to reflect upon early church movement praxis instead for the following major reason. Each of the five communities of faith examined consists of members who come from either Sunni, Shiite, or Druze religious and cultural backgrounds. In these faith traditions, sacred texts are revered and are considered to be authoritative, regardless of their age, for everyday life.[5] This reverence for an authoritative sacred text has been carried over into the church practice of each of the new fellowships. Time is spent weekly in public reading of Scripture passages coupled with either exposition in the form of public teaching or inductive group study as encouraged by the Discovery Bible Study

[3] David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 45.
[4] Bill Taylor, Gautam Sinha, and Taposh Ghoshal, *Research Methodology: A Guide for Researchers in Management and Social Sciences* (New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India Pvt. Ltd., 2006), 28.
[5] See John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford History of Islam,* 1st ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6, and Anis Obeid, *Druze and Their Faith in Tawhid* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 277.

methodology. As each of the churches was originally a result of some form of a Protestant evangelical missionary effort, the centrality of an authoritative sacred text, in this case the Bible, was a value transferred to the church plants that also resonated with the adherents' reverence for the "holy books." It is noteworthy that as the interviews were being conducted Western missiological thinking and the praxis of non-Muslim background churches (both in the West and the Near East) were challenged, on occasion vigorously, by some of the interviewees. However, questions relating to the practice or beliefs of the early churches were never negatively contested in the interviewees' answers, nor was their praxis considered irrelevant.

I considered a reflection upon the practice of the early church movement, particularly focusing on the questions that the Muslim background believers themselves are asking, to have the potential of a high reward. Its purpose is to encourage discussion and further reflection by these very same Christ-followers. The Bible is a book that they are all familiar with, generally have easy access to, and study regularly. Challenging questions and observations arising out of a familiar text, regarded as authoritative, are in my opinion more likely to achieve that desired result of discussion and reflection upon contemporary practice than a comparative study of a modern-day context.

In conclusion I have chosen to compare my reading of contemporary scholarly exposition regarding the early churches in the apostolic period and four Muslim or Druze background churches found in the Near East today. The early churches, rooted in the Christian tradition and described in the sacred texts, offer enough areas of similarity to the contemporary fellowships described in the case studies that meaningful and interesting comparisons can be made.

A Description of the Life and Ministry of the Early Church Movement in the Apostolic Period

Introduction

As a means of adequately engaging with the interview material, particularly as it relates to community practice, a hermeneutical framework within the Christian tradition needed to be utilized. After some consideration I have chosen the early church movement as that framework and have outlined my reasoning in the previous section. Particular aspects of mission and community formation were examined more fully, though not exclusively, as a result of the issues raised in the first round of interviews. From an examination of early church praxis, questions were formulated for the second set of interviews and a critical engagement was undertaken with the contemporary practices of the five communities.

In this chapter I have approached the discussion of first century churches armed with questions that arose out of the previous section's interviews. From the large number of credible scholars available I have chosen Bosch, Dunn, Meeks, Schnabel, and N.T. Wright for their significant contributions to the field of early church mission and community formation. I found their different perspectives acted as useful lenses in my examination, as Meeks sought to describe the early churches using the tools of the social sciences, Bosch and Schnabel did the same from the perspective of mission, and Dunn and Wright engaged the topic from their positions as New Testament historians. Having said that, however, this chapter is not intended to be an in-depth New Testament study. Rather, I have created a synthesis of what the aforementioned scholars have observed about first century church praxis in order to create a possible general description of those early communities. That description has become my hermeneutical framework for critical engagement.

It must be acknowledged that there were divergent movements within early Christianity, possibly with different faith expressions or at least emphases,[6] and also that many specific details of how the first century Christians practiced their faith remain unclear.[7] However, I will demonstrate in this chapter that there are enough clues from the New Testament and other writers in antiquity to get a rough but useful sketch of the practice of the early churches.[8]

This section will demonstrate that the early church movement was not content to exist as a sect within Judaism but sought to create a distinct community with their own separate identity. They did this by creating boundaries that distinguished the early churches from the wider society through their use of language, their teachings on behavior, the creation of rituals and symbols, and the establishment of a new leadership structure.

This section will also explore possible reasons why the early churches chose this path despite the strong Jewish culture of the congregations, and time will be spent entering into dialogue with Wright's constructed first century churches' worldview as a driver not only for community and identity formation but also for mission. A link will be established between the praxis of the early Christian movement, the supposed worldview of the first adherents, and the teachings of Jesus which shaped their thinking.

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[6] Pauline, Johannine, Petrine, Hebrews, etc.

[7] Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 3-8. See also N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 342, 346.

[8] For a fuller explanation of the complexities of getting an accurate picture of the first century church, see Wright, *New Testament,* 341-358, and Morwenna Ludlow, *The Early Church* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2009), xiii-xvi.

A Description of Form and Praxis

General observations

Looking at the early churches of the New Testament period we discover a new movement emerging from within Judaism to establish a unique community with a distinct identity.[9] These churches faced considerable and sometimes violent opposition, firstly from the Jewish community and then later from the wider pagan society.[10] They were generally regarded with confusion, suspicion, and even outright disgust, yet continued to attract many followers from within both the Jewish and Greco-Roman communities. They continued to propagate their message, which they believed was for all peoples regardless of race, culture or social position, at great personal sacrifice, convinced that by doing so they were fulfilling a sacred duty. It must be noted also that despite many unfavorable circumstances this movement was numerically highly successful.[11]

However, to speak of the New Testament church may be a misnomer. Dunn would prefer to think not of one coherent body called the first century church but rather a diverse network of different communities reflecting various expressions of the church while still regarding itself to varying degrees as part of a greater whole.[12] Christianity[13] in the first century had such a distinct Jewish "flavor" that he believes that it was able to survive for a period of time because of the diversity found within contemporary Second Temple Judaism.[14] To describe the praxis of the first century church (or "historical churches" as Dunn would describe them),[15] it is helpful to focus first on the early Jerusalem church with its unique context and then move on to a description of the Pauline churches later in the chapter.

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[9] Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church: From Jesus to Constantine, AD 30-312*, ed. Tim Dowley (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2012), 67. Also Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1.

[10] Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity,* 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub., 2003), 20.

[11] Meeks and Stark detail the estimated numerical growth and the geographical expansion of the early church movement. See Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 1, and Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 4-13. See also Paul McKechnie, *The First Christian Centuries: Perspectives on the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 56, for an opposing view on numbers. Despite this numerical success, Bosch highlights three major areas where he believes the first churches actually failed, that is: 1. by founding a new religion instead of fulfilling Judaism; 2. by becoming an institution instead of remaining a movement; 3. by failing to make the Jews feel at home in the church. These three major areas diminish, in his opinion, the success of the early church. See Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 52.

[12] James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 16. Dunn believes that the case for a coherent whole can be made from the unifying belief that each believer and each community was continuing the mission of Jesus.

[13] A term not used until at least 110 A.D. See Dunn, *Beginning,* 6.

[14] Another contributing factor for the historical churches to regard themselves as part of a coherent whole. See Dunn, *Beginning*, 16-17. See also Davidson, *The Birth of the Church,* 45.

[15] Dunn, *Beginning,* 4.

The Jerusalem church

- Worship praxis:

The early Jerusalem church grew rapidly from the initial 120 adherents to something possibly numbering between three and five thousand (Acts 1:11, 1:15, 2:7, 2:41, 4:4). Starting with a core group of Galileans, the community grew to embrace all levels of society including a large number of priests and Pharisees (Acts 6:7, 15:5).[16]

After meeting initially in an upper room, they moved to meeting in the temple (possibly in large numbers) and in private homes (Acts 1:15, 2:46, 5:42) of community members (smaller gatherings).[17] It is recorded that they met regularly (Acts 2:46), even daily. When they met they broke bread (Acts 2:42, 46) (commonly combined with a meal), prayed, received teaching from the apostles, baptized converts in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:41-42), praised God (Acts 2:47) and distinctly focused their worship on Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah and Lord.[18]

They enjoyed fellowship together, spending time in each other's homes worshipping, encouraging one another, and sharing common meals. The most outstanding sign of their fellowship was the sharing of their possessions (Acts 2:44-45, 4:34, 6:1), a way of making their mutual commitment to each other visible, which, though voluntary (Acts 5:1-11), seems to have met many of the physical needs of the church members.[19]

- Leadership:

Foundational to this early community was the leadership of "the twelve" (1 Corinthians 15:5, Revelation 21:14, Acts 6:2).[20] With responsibilities for teaching and prayer, church discipline, and the appointment of coworkers, they played a key role in the formation and development of the Jerusalem church.[21] Commissioned to evangelize in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), they also shouldered responsibilities for establishing churches in other regions and the development of the Gentile mission (Acts 6:4).[22] Of the twelve, Peter,

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[16] Dunn, *Beginning*, 180. Conzelmann disputes these numbers, stating that they are to be regarded figuratively rather than statistically. His skepticism is based on his belief that the population of Jerusalem was only 20,000 at that time. See Hans Conzelmann, *History of Primitive Christianity*, trans. John E. Steely (New York: Abingdon Press, 1973), 62, 63. Schnabel, accepting Luke's account, believes that the inhabitants of Jerusalem in 45 A.D. numbered at least 60,000 and probably more likely over 100,000. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 1, 420.

[17] W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 87; Dunn, *Beginning,* 180, 181; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 407-424.

[18] Dunn, *Beginning,* 198-200; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 414; Wright, *New Testament,* 362. The worship would have presumably included the Jewish practice of singing psalms and hymns which is later mentioned in Ephesians 5:18-20. See Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 144.

[19] Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 87; Dunn, *Beginning*, 181-184; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 413, 414.

[20] Witherington III, *New Testament History,* 176; Dunn, *Beginning,* 206-212.

[21] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 426; Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 59, 60.

[22] Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity,* 2nd ed., 72; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 426.

James, and John seemed to have had particularly significant roles, though Schnabel believes that they did not act independently of the church, with key decisions seeming to have been made with the participation and approval of the whole community (Acts 1:23, 6:5, 11:22, 15:22).[23] It would also appear, according to Schnabel, that the twelve were remarkably flexible in their roles, as evidenced in the appointment of "the seven" who worked alongside the apostles, at least for a time, possibly overseeing the financial affairs and the physical needs of the community.[24]

Schnabel sees a change in leadership around A.D. 41 or 42 when, because of persecution particularly directed toward the twelve, elders seem to have played more of a leadership role in the believing community in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30).[25] It is possible that the church may have been following a structure typically seen in the synagogue and Jewish communities at that time.[26] James, the brother of Jesus, also took on a more prominent role alongside the elders, one which he possibly held until his martyrdom in A.D. 62 (Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18).[27] That Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Barnabas are also mentioned leads Dunn to wonder if this is some indication of an influential role that these two held.[28] It is probable that the original twelve apostles took on more of an itinerant role after AD 41 or 42, though they were still actively involved in major decisions as evidenced in Acts 15.[29]

- Mission:

The mission of the Jerusalem church was founded in and crafted by the mission of the twelve. Commissioned by Christ and understood by themselves and the wider believing community to be envoys of the Messiah,[30] the apostles modeled their mission methodology on the methodology of Jesus.[31] Starting in Jerusalem[32] as they were commanded (Acts 1:8), the first disciples continued in the ministry praxis of Jesus by public proclamation of the good news on the Temple Mount (Acts 3:1, 4:1-2, 5:12) and the demonstration of God's power through the

[23] Dunn, *Beginning,* 206-212. Schnabel, however, sees Peter as the *primus inter pares*. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 426, 427.
[24] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 427. Also Davidson, *The Birth of the Church,* 124, 125.
[25] Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 88. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 427.
[26] Dunn, *Beginning,* 206-212. Other leaders most probably emerged also. Barnett surmises that the Nazarene relatives of Jesus could have become leaders of the early church in Galilee. Paul Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 94.
[27] Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 114. See also Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 427, 434.
[28] Dunn, *Beginning,* 206-212.
[29] Witherington III, *New Testament History,* 243. See also Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 430.
[30] Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 271; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 393.
[31] Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul,* 61, 62; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 553.
[32] For a broader discussion on the significance of Jerusalem as the starting place of the Christian movement, despite the twelve apostles and indeed a significant proportion of the 120 gathered in Acts 2 having Galilean roots, see Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 91. Also Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul,* 58, 59.

performing of miracles (Acts 5:6). This public proclamation was further continued in the synagogues by Stephen (Acts 6:8-10) and presumably others (Acts 2:46-47, 5:42). Schnabel also observes:

> The comment in Acts 8:3 that Saul entered "house after house" in order to drag off both men and women who he arrested and committed to prison might plausibly be taken as an indication of house churches that actively proclaimed the gospel and attracted new converts.[33]

In addition, Schnabel also sees the attractive community life shared by the believers meeting in homes, worshipping and eating together, caring for each other's financial needs while teaching the gospel of Christ as being a particularly significant dimension of the Jerusalem church's mission.[34]

This mission was remarkably successful, with people embracing the claims of Christ daily (Acts 2:47, 5:14, 6:7) both in Jerusalem and also in the surrounding villages (Acts 5:16). It was rooted in the conviction held by the apostles that salvation was found only in faith in Christ.[35] This was not a self-conceived agenda but rather they were "led by the Spirit."[36] Initially, early church mission was confined to Israel, as indeed the ministry of Jesus had been, with the repentance of God's covenant people seen as a priority. However, this began to change as the years progressed.[37]

Schnabel proposes that the Jerusalem church's missional praxis was part of a broader strategy held by the twelve apostles.[38] Convinced of their commissioning by Christ as "fishers of people" (Matthew 4:19), the twelve proclaimed the message of God's redemptive plan through the Messiah to as many people as possible, both Jew and Gentile, in every place, establishing communities of faith "in which the God of Abraham was worshipped as the only true God and in which Jesus was accepted and believed as Messiah and Savior."[39] They (and other early Christian missionaries) were motivated, argues Schnabel, by the conviction that Jesus was the only solution to the separation between God and man. This motivated their mission as they preached to the Jews and as they engaged the pagan religions of the Gentiles.[40] Schnabel also

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[33] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 91.
[34] Ibid., 420.
[35] Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Revised ed., 76-81; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 420. For a fuller discussion of the debate around the exclusivity of Acts 4:12, see Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 421.
[36] Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Revised ed., 25; Schnabel, Early Christian Mission, vol. 1, 391. See also Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 43.
[37] Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul,* 60; Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 41, 42.
[38] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 511.
[39] Ibid., 512.
[40] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 1, 533. Bosch, on the other hand, has a different view. He sees the Jerusalem church's attitude toward the conversion of Gentiles as similar to the attitude found in contemporary

sees the early Christian missionaries (led by the twelve) as motivated by the belief that the mission among the Gentiles is a prerequisite to the second coming of Christ.[41] Despite some significant hesitation at times (as seen in Acts 10 for example) this resulted in an early Christian mission movement that traveled to towns and villages where no followers of Jesus existed, seeking out synagogues and marketplaces to preach to Jews and Gentiles alike. As people responded, the converts were gathered in congregations that were open to visits of interested nonbelievers and hence the movement grew beyond Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria, Caesarea, Phoenicia, Cyprus, Asia Minor, and on into Europe.[42]

It is important to recognize the significant place that the Jerusalem church holds in ecclesial history. Adolf Schlatter notes that "without the Jerusalem church there would never have been a church anywhere…"[43] After gleaning a description of this foundational community it will be helpful to seek to describe early churches that emerged outside of Palestine.

Early churches beyond Jerusalem

- Worship praxis:

Wright proposes that, from the beginning of the movement, Christianity was not like a typical religion found at that time in the ancient world. They had no sacred sites and did not sacrifice animals in worship. They were not a political group[44] concerned with affairs of state but rather focused their efforts on a spiritual kingdom. Though they were monotheistic like the Jews, they worshipped Jesus and practiced fellowship inclusive of other races. As the confusion around the group escalated, so did the misunderstandings leading to inflammatory accusations of

Judaism toward pagan proselytes. The difference is that where proselytes were never fully integrated into Judaism, Gentile converts were accepted and incorporated into the early Christian movement without reservation. However, Bosch does see the conversion of Gentiles by the Jerusalem church as a "spinoff of a mission directed primarily at Jews," see Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 42, and that the early believers never particularly focused on non-Jews. Antioch is where mission to the Gentiles first truly took root in the understanding of the early believers. See Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 41-43. Witherington sides with Bosch; see Witherington III, *New Testament History,* 178. Schnabel lays out a convincing argument that Gentile mission was in the vision of the early believers, particularly the twelve, from the beginning and points to numerous New Testament texts to support his argument. See Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 523-536. I have sided with Schnabel in this debate as is reflected in the paragraph above.

[41] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 533, 534. See also Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 379, and Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul,* 51.

[42] Roderic L. Mullen, *The Expansion of Christianity: A Gazetteer of its First Three Centuries* (Leiden: Brill Academic Pub., 2004), 141.

[43] Adolf Schlatter, *Die Theologie der Apostel* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1922), 452, quoted in Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 390.

[44] Though their actions and lifestyle could be understood as subversive. See section "Patterns of Mission" in this chapter.

immorality and secret orgies.[45] What was the early Christian praxis as they gathered together in worship?

There are suggestions that from the earliest period the first Christians met regularly, though how often and on what day is unclear.[46] Certainly by 150 A.D. there were regular weekly meetings on a Sunday that could well have originated with the first century churches.[47] Also unclear is what actually happened behind closed doors in the various assemblies scattered around the Mediterranean. Definitely they were worshipping a god whom they proclaimed was the one true God, the creator, while in the same instance also worshipping Jesus Christ.[48] It is also clear that they were celebrating the Eucharist and baptizing converts and most probably had communal meals on a regular basis.[49] But what else did they practice? In the Scriptures the closest thing to an actual description comes in the form of a rebuke and corrective instruction found in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, though there are other indicators that would point to a common practice.[50]

It appears that chanting and singing were common elements in a Christian meeting. Most probably it was biblical psalms that were being chanted and sung but also, Meeks surmises, Colossians 3:16 and other similar passages may indicate that there were original Christian compositions.[51] He points out that their function was to be sung not only "to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:19) but also sung as a congregation to each other as a form of teaching and admonition (Colossians 3:16).[52]

Instruction and admonition were not only the function of the entire body as mentioned above but also were tasks undertaken by prophets (1 Corinthians 14:3, 19) and local leadership (1 Thessalonians 5:12). It would be assumed that there was also the public reading of Scripture and preaching based on those texts but the actual details of if and how this was done are

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[45] Wright, *New Testament,* 365.

[46] Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2 may indicate both a regular meeting and a specific day. See Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 104.

[47] By the time of Pliny the Younger (110 A.D.), Christians in Bithynia were meeting weekly, and by the time of Justin (150 A.D.), Christians were meeting on Sunday, though there are suggestions that this was an established practice much earlier. Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 143.

[48] "This, of course, brought about all sorts of headaches for the later fathers, who struggled to provide a rationalization for the practice. But the practice itself, rather than the (sometimes torturous) theological explanations, shows every sign of being a central feature of Christianity from the beginning." Wright, *New Testament,* 362. Bosch highlights the radical political dimension of proclaiming "Jesus as Lord of all lords – the most revolutionary political demonstration imaginable in the Roman Empire." Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 48.

[49] Wright, *New Testament,* 363, 364; Dunn, *Beginning,* 199.

[50] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 144.

[51] Meeks surmises that Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1:15-20, Ephesians 1:3-14 and 1 Timothy 3:16 are possible examples of some of the original hymns that the early church sang or chanted. See Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 145. See also Davidson, *The Birth of the Church,* 118.

[52] Davidson, *The Birth of the Church,* 118.

unclear. The references and arguments from Scripture that Paul and other writers make[53] seem to assume some method for hearing or reading the text and traditions of interpretation, and Meeks believes regular public Scripture reading and exposition to be the most plausible means.[54] In addition to exposition he states it would be logical to assume that proclamation about the person and work of Jesus Christ with the accompanying applicable warnings, admonitions, appeals, etc., was also a common practice.[55]

Meeks imagines a typical gathering could have been like the following:

> Joining the meeting in Gaius's overcrowded dining room, we might have heard, along with the reminders of our life before baptism and a new life now, revelations of "words of the Lord," prophecies about things to come, admonitions to love each other as Christ loved us, as well as discourses on the topos "on marriage," or "on brotherly love." We would have been urged to exercise body and mind for the great contest of life, pressing on to the goal, not fearing the pain of the difficulties, which would prove our character.

Prayer, possibly based on Jewish patterns (with Christian ideas and vocabulary), also played a central role in the meetings, with formal prayers as well as spontaneous expressions. Glossolalia was also present, with Meeks suggesting that this last practice would have most probably been part of the ritual of the service, with the Corinthian passages written to address the phenomenon that was out of order.

Meeks sees many hints in the epistles to the practice of forms, rites, and formal customs which he believes also allowed room for individuals to spontaneously express a hymn, an exhortation, a prophecy, etc., within the framework of that ritual. Interestingly enough, he also raises the possibility that the "holy kiss" (1 Thessalonians 5:26, Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Peter 5:14) could have also been part of this ritual, perhaps to mark the end of the meeting or mark the transition to the Lord's Supper. He does, however, admit to the general lack of hard evidence for these postulates, however credible.[56] The nature of occasional letters written for specific situations as found in the New Testament may be a contributing factor to this.

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[53] Meeks refers to Ephesians 2:11-22, 4:8-12, 5:21-33 as examples. See Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 146.

[54] Meeks feels that the assumption that historians of liturgy make regarding the reading and exposition of Scripture is based on the supposed example of what was occurring in Jewish synagogues. He points out that very little is known about contemporary Jewish synagogue practice outside of some brief descriptions in the New Testament. Though he finds this assumption, i.e. that the early churches read and expounded Scripture in public, quite credible he still questions the evidence to support it. See Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 146. Schnabel would take it a step further and sees the frequent Scripture references in Paul's writings as a strong indicator that the public reading of Scripture was a regular feature of early church worship. See Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 198.

[55] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 146.

[56] Ibid.*,* 149.

In conclusion Meeks does state that despite most of the limited evidence coming from the letters to the Corinthians (in addition to other passing references), he believes:

> …we are safe in assuming that many if not all of these (practices) were common. The earliest of the letters reassures us that this was so, for it speaks already of instruction, admonition, prayer, thanksgiving, prophesying and perhaps other "ecstatic" demonstrations…the holy kiss, and the reading of the apostolic letter (1 Thess. 5:12-27), and it ends as a meeting might, with a benediction (1 Thess. 5:28).[57]

This descriptive section of possible early church praxis should remain as such, that is, descriptive rather than prescriptive. The forms through which worship, fellowship, teaching, etc., can be expressed are myriad, with some being unique to each culture or generation that embraces the gospel. However, one potential area for discussion is the possibility of discerning an overarching pattern of worship from the aforementioned details. Schnabel, in attempting to define a church, proposed simple broad categories for a gathering for worship that I have found useful. He suggests that church gatherings consisted of a time to experience Christ together (through worship, prayer, and the sacraments), a space to care for and serve one another, and a time for teaching and admonition.[58]

- Churches in homes:

There is strong evidence to suggest that the majority (if not all) of the churches established before the mid-200s met in homes.[59] The New Testament material (particularly the epistles) tends to engage with churches situated in an urban environment,[60] made up of people from all walks of life,[61]where the public and private spheres intersected.[62] Where they met logically would have had an impact on the size of the gathering.[63] Those meetings in the poor tenement blocks[64] were probably restricted to around twelve worshippers, while those meeting in large, wealthier villas would perhaps be numbered around fifty.[65] The size of the gathering would

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[57] Ibid., 149,150.
[58] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 235, 236, 422.
[59] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 75; Dunn, *Beginning,* 602.
[60] Though James 5 could be a notable exception.
[61] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 51-73. Meeks surveys the varying opinions of scholars regarding the social standing of the majority of Christians who made up the churches of the first century. Some hold to the long-held belief that almost all the first century Christians were poor (see Dunn, *Beginning,* 607), while others see them as distinctly middle-class. Meeks himself believes that the adherents were from multiple social strata reflecting the society of the day with "the extreme top and bottom of the Greco-Roman social scale…missing from the picture."
[62] Carolyn Osiek, Margaret Y. MacDonald, and Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2005), 4.
[63] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 2, 1304; Dunn, *Beginning,* 608.
[64] Dunn, *Beginning,* 606. These block houses typically measured 10 sq. meters. See also Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 300.
[65] Dunn, *Beginning,* 607; Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 300, 301; Robert Jewett, "Tenement Churches and Pauline Love Feasts," *Quarterly Review* 14, (1994): 43-58; Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of*

determine to a large extent the practice of the church and, as the majority of people in the Roman Empire in the first century lived in tenement block housing, Schnabel believes that the church probably sought out larger villas to meet in as the numbers of adherents grew.[66] This would then require the church to have a patron which, interestingly, may have become a way of identifying local congregations.[67]

Schnabel sees great advantages to meeting in private homes. Many synagogues of the period were initially founded in private homes and perhaps the early worshippers, the majority of whom were Jews, proselytes, and God-fearers, would have been quite familiar with meeting in a private residence for religious reasons.[68] In addition to requiring no particular specialized structure for Christian worship, a fellowship that had as a core element common meals (which also included the Lord's supper) would also find a home quite a suitable place to meet.[69] Schnabel also sees the home as a place for "Christians to meet in a relatively inconspicuous manner,"[70] particularly after the local synagogues turned antagonistic toward followers of Jesus the Messiah.[71] These homes, then, became "the base of missionary work, the foundational center of a local church, the location of the assembly for worship, the lodging for the missionaries and envoys and at the same time, of course, the primary and decisive place of Christian life and formation."[72]

Meeting in private homes may not have been just a pragmatic solution for an early community seeking to create a space for corporate worship. The "house" or "family" was the most fundamental social reality in the ancient world[73] and as such the early Pauline churches were

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Household Structures in Early Christianity (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 149. Unlike Dunn and Jewett, Schnabel and Gehring do not believe that people met in these tenement block homes regularly due to their size. Having personally attempted to conduct Bible studies in small rooms of similar size with families (including children) present, I tend to agree with Schnabel and Gehring that it is difficult to see how it could be practical over the long-term.

[66] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 300, 301.

[67] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 2, 1304; Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 75.

[68] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 303.

[69] Ibid. See also Osiek, MacDonald, and Tulloch, *A Woman's Place,* 12-15.

[70] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 303.

[71] Ibid. I find difficulty with this last assumption, especially if we think that a local congregation may have been between 30 to 60 people. That they could meet in a "relatively inconspicuous manner," particularly in close-knit communities (like the Jewish Diaspora), I believe is a very optimistic scenario. Could Schnabel have been thinking of the large cities like Rome, Ephesus, or Antioch, where they could perhaps meet with more anonymity? I think a more likely scenario is that it was known where they were meeting, which was in turn tolerated by some, and a cause for ostracism and indeed persecution by others. Osiek and Balch tend to agree. See Carolyn A. Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 34, 35.

[72] Jurgen Becker, "Paulus und seine Gemeinden," in *Anfange des Christentums: Alte Welt und Neue Hoffnung*, ed. J. Becker (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1987), 125, 126. As quoted by Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 300. See also Osiek, MacDonald, and Tulloch, *A Woman's Place,* 12-15.

[73] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 300.

linking themselves to the foundational structure of society. Households in the Greco-Roman world were far more broad and inclusive than contemporary Western familial institutions. They would include immediate relatives and slaves and possibly workers, freedmen, tenants, and business partners and took on a broader role as a welfare society or association.[74] Interestingly, as E.A. Judge points out, theological ideas were sometimes framed in household terminology (e.g. "God's household" (Ephesians 2:19) and "household of faith" (Galatians 6:10)), communicating in readily understood concepts but perhaps seemingly reinforcing the notion that many aspects of the household social structure were adopted by the early Christian movement.[75]

There were numerous types of associations in society at that time and it would appear that they shared some common traits.[76] They were not exclusive in their membership nor restricted in their focus and seem to have existed primarily to aid the non-elite (that is, those less well-connected) to better function in society. All associations appear to have had a religious dimension, though not in opposition to the imperial cult. They shared common meals. Membership ran between 15 to 100 attendees with a typical size being around 30 to 40.[77]

> For the most part, associations served important aspects of the social, cultural, and religious needs of the broad civic community, particularly the middle and lower ranking members of society, regularly acting as friendly or welfare societies for their members, including provision of a good burial.[78]

Certainly the commonality between early church praxis and existing associations in society at that time is evident. Comparisons have been made with the early churches and synagogues, philosophical schools, and other voluntary associations. The household was one type of association.

As the new emerging churches centered themselves in the home, they were quite possibly perceived as a household association by the wider society.[79] Most probably the church would have situated itself within the network of existing relationships, both internal (family members, slaves, etc.) and external (friends, business partners, etc.), found in the household**,** and the place itself would have afforded some stability and privacy. However, despite the fact that the

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[74] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 75, 76; Dunn, *Beginning,* 610, 611. See also Daniel J. Harrington, *The Church According to the New Testament: What the Wisdom and Witness of Early Christianity Teach Us Today* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 149.

[75] David M. Scholer and Edwin A. Judge, *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays by E. A. Judge*, Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 26, 27.

[76] Ethnic or regional, occupational, neighborhood, philosophical schools, religious cults, synagogues, etc. See Dunn, *Beginning,* 610, 611, 615. Also see Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, eds., *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 149-154.

[77] See Dunn, *Beginning,* 615.

[78] Ibid.*,*616, 617.

[79] Ibid.*,* 610.

early urban churches may have borrowed heavily from this pre-existing social structure, Meeks still sees the inadequacy of this structure to fully accommodate the new church. A particular question on his mind relates to the rigid hierarchy present in a household association and its contrast with the egalitarian beliefs held by Christians.[80] When the head of the household was expected to be in charge and have legal responsibility according to society, Meeks also questions the role of the apostles and how they could have adapted to this structure. These questions lead Meeks to surmise that other "models and social ideas were at work."[81] Williams, reflecting on the same issue, suggests that the house churches may have looked to the position of "steward" as a more suitable leadership model. She wonders if the patriarchal leadership model prevalent in the Mediterranean world at that time (which certainly influenced the household structure) would be seen to be at odds with the vision for ecclesial servant leadership outlined by Jesus and Paul.[82] The role of steward (most often a servant or slave in charge of the household) would have been, in her opinion, more suited.[83]

Theissen and Schutz on the other hand propose that "an ethos of primitive Christian love-patriarchalism" existed. They suggest that early Christians, rather than diverging from the patriarchal household model as suggested by Meeks and Williams, adapted it to Christian values. They state:

> This love-patriarchalism takes social differences for granted but ameliorates them through an obligation of respect and love, an obligation imposed upon those who are socially stronger. From the weaker are required subordination, fidelity and esteem… Its historical effectiveness is rooted not least of all in the ability to integrate members of different strata. Christian brotherhood probably would have been more radically carried out within the socially homogeneous groups. That is much easier, however, than realizing a measure of brotherhood within communities which are sharply stratified socially. It was here that primitive Christianity's love-patriarchalism offered a realistic solution.[84]

While early Christians may have incorporated forms and structure from pre-existing models in society, their gatherings were so shaped by the gospel message as to make them distinct from those models, certainly in character and quite possibly to some degree in structure. If the latter is true one might infer then that there were limits to the contextualization, beyond lifestyle, practiced by the first churches. It would appear that the household structure had many aspects

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[80] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 76.
[81] Ibid.*,* 77.
[82] Ritva H. Williams, *Stewards, Prophets, Keepers of the Word: Leadership in the Early Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 37.
[83] Ibid., 55-58.
[84] Gerd Theissen and John H. Schutz, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub., 2004), 107, 108.

that suited the early movement, yet certain values expressed in the gospel message were also understood by early Christians to supersede pre-existing cultural models.[85]

- Leadership:

Another distinguishing factor in the formation of community and identity was the establishment of leadership both within the local congregations and also across the movement as a whole. Meeks uses an examination of different incidents of conflict within the new communities as a means to discover more about the early church structure and how the leadership functioned.[86] He makes several general observations. Firstly, within 20 years of the death of Christ the Christian movement had become a distinct sect within the wider Jewish community, with centers not only in Jerusalem but also in Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, Rome, and Alexandria.[87] This distinct sect had seen the emergence of its own leadership who were able to settle disputes and conflict within their own movement. Secondly, there was an overarching concern for unity and a conviction that what happened in Antioch, for example, affected the local movement in Jerusalem. Because of this there appears to be a moving around from place to place of certain leaders, some of them official delegates and others not, who would come and bring teaching and correction to the local congregations. This flows into Meeks' third observation that conflict resolution appeared to be conducted face-to-face and/or by letter, though there appears to be no formal means of arbitration beyond this.

Certainly there is evidence to suggest some hierarchy, but essentially roles within the community appear to be understood as gifts of the Spirit and hence quite fluid.[88] In addressing the Corinthian congregation, Paul stresses the unity of the Spirit and teaches on the apportioning of honor that happens in this new movement. Leading Christians (such as apostles) were not to be elevated above others and were not to use wealth or authority or status symbols as a means of gaining prestige. Leaders were to regard themselves and be regarded by others not as patrons but rather as servants or workers laboring in the fields.[89]

Within the framework and value system outlined above, Meeks is able to identify certain types of leaders within the early Christian churches beyond Jerusalem.[90] Arguably the most prominent

[85] E.g. leadership and authority, hierarchy and egalitarianism. 1 Corinthians 1 would seem to indicate that the gospel was particularly attractive to the lower classes.
[86] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 111-131.
[87] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 2, 1491.
[88] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 113. On the other hand, Merkle believes that emphasizing this fluidity too much is dangerous, as it firstly disregards the fact that God gifts and calls specific individuals to serve as "appointed leaders in the church," and, secondly, creates "an artificial separation between gift (charisma) and the office." See Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2014), 59.
[89] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 240.
[90] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 131.

leadership type was that of the apostles,[91] who did not appear to represent an office but rather fulfilled a function, particularly in regards to the missional activity of the early believers.[92] Apart from the twelve and Paul, there could possibly have been a large number of other people who would have identified themselves or been identified by others as apostles and who may have filled various functions.[93] Certainly Paul, who saw himself as a father figure to the new emerging communities that he established, exerted his authority by clearly correcting and commanding believers often in his letters. It would appear that the term "apostle" was important to Paul, though not all recognized him as such (1 Corinthians 9:2), for it embodied a commission received by revelation to proclaim the gospel among Gentiles and to establish churches.[94]

Another group that assumed a leadership role in the early churches were believers that could best be termed "fellow workers" serving with and for apostles such as Paul, Peter, Barnabas, Philip, and Apollos. Mission, as recorded in the New Testament writings, was a team enterprise (certainly it was with Paul) as apostles recruited partners to travel and work with them in the ministry.[95] Apparently these partners fulfilled many functions such as helping to plant fellowships (2 Corinthians 1:19), co-authoring letters[96] to churches, being sent to check up on newly established fellowships (1 Thessalonians 3:2, 6), dealing with difficult and delicate situations within the new churches (1 Corinthians 4:17, 16:10, 2 Corinthians 2:13, 7:6-16), organizing the monetary collection for Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:6, 16-24) and generally being a companion of the apostle even in difficult times.[97] Others like Priscilla and Aquila served more as patrons and protectors, not only of Paul but also of the local house churches while fulfilling both an evangelistic and teaching role for the movement (Acts 18:26).[98] Some of these "fellow

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[91] Ibid. Avoiding a long, detailed discussion about the origins of the transliterated Greek word "apostle," Meeks simply defines the word as "envoy" or "agent."

[92] This could be debated further, particularly in the case of the twelve whose appointment by the Christ was rich with symbolism (see Dunn, *Beginning*, 152) in relation to the twelve tribes and the creation of a new kingdom. Meeks' point is that apostleship was not a position to be institutionalized, an opinion with which I tend to agree. However, as will be seen in the next chapter, the debate about office or role, though interesting, is one that I've chosen not to engage as it appears to be less relevant to the emerging churches among Muslims in the Near East.

[93] See Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 132, 133 for a list of possible candidates for apostleship. Meeks also interestingly points out that Luke does not refer to anyone other than the "twelve" as apostles except in Acts 14:4, 14 where he uses that term for Paul. Meeks refers to Epaphroditus as an example of one that was called "your apostle" (Philippians 2:25) and seems to have been tasked with bringing money from the Philippian church to Paul in prison. Meeks sees this as evidence of an apostle with limited authority in comparison to Paul or the "twelve."

[94] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 131, 132.

[95] Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 49, 50. Schnabel estimates that 18% of these companions were women. See Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 251.

[96] E.g. Silvanus, Timothy, Sosthenes. See Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 133, and Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 197, 198.

[97] Meeks identifies Timothy as being with Paul while he was imprisoned in either Rome or Ephesus but not being imprisoned himself. See Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 133.

[98] Ibid.

workers" seem to be itinerant while others were local leaders fixed in a certain location, yet all fulfilled a function of aiding the apostles in their mission through various means.[99] As Meeks states, "Indeed what is perhaps most impressive is the complexity and fluidity of the network of leaders that tied the Pauline *ekklesiai* together."[100]

The third group that Meeks identifies is what he terms "local leadership."[101] There is no mention of formal offices at a congregational level in the early churches, which is surprising when compared to the contemporary Roman and Greek voluntary associations.[102] However, after examining the lists of leaders and functions (like prophets, teachers, evangelists found in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30, Romans 12:6-8, Ephesians 4:11), Meeks arrives at an interesting conclusion. Similarly to his observations concerning the position of apostle, he proposes that the above listed positions fulfilled roles and functions rather than constituting institutionalized offices. They are, after all, gifts given to local congregations.[103] He wonders whether the few roles that are common to every list is an indication that some degree of formalization is already taking place during the time of Paul's apostleship. However, the distinction that Meeks makes between an actual, officially-established office and someone functioning as a leader may not be relevant to this discussion. Certainly there are elders that were appointed by the apostles or his companions (Acts 14:22, 23, Titus 1:5) to continue the ongoing pastoral and teaching responsibilities after the departure of the missionary team (Acts 20:28-31, 1 Peter 5:1-4).[104] Some of them were supported by the local fellowships, indicating a further recognition of position. All were expected to labor (1 Thessalonians 5:12), shepherd, judge, admonish, and guide the local congregations. Whether there existed an established recognized office called "pastor" at the time of Paul's writings is not known.[105] However, the important area of note is the observation that there was a possible trend toward roles that people stepped in and out of

[99] Ibid., 134. Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 49.
[100] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 134.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Though some suggest the local leadership structure could well have been borrowed from the synagogue. For a fuller discussion, see Merkle and Schreiner, *Shepherding God's Flock,* 14-31. Interestingly, by the use of different terminology to describe those positions, it would indicate again the early communities' desire to retain their distinctiveness from the wider Jewish community. See Dunn, *Beginning,* 206-212. The roles appear to formalize around the turn of the first century according to the writings of Clement of Rome and Ignatius. See Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 134.
[103] Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 134.
[104] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 48. Also, Ott and Wilson see the appointment of local elders as evidence that the missionary work there was considered completed. They use the example of Barnabas and Paul in Acts 14, who, after appointing elders, "committed the believers to the Lord and departed." Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 269.
[105] Perry Shaw, "The Missional-Ecclesial Leadership Vision of the Early Church," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 37, no. 4 (2013): 131-139.

rather than more permanent long-term positions. This appears at least to be the case before the gradual shift to increased institutionalization in the early second century.[106]

Though this is an interesting debate that would require much more space to reach a conclusion, I've chosen to move beyond thinking of roles, positions, and offices to examining the source of the leadership's authority.

- Foundations for authority:

Meeks examines the cases found in the New Testament where conflict is addressed in order to understand the relational dynamic that existed between Paul and the churches. He is particularly interested in what he terms "warrants" upon which Paul based his authority and influence as he dealt with situations that were in need of correction.[107] Asserting that there existed in the early church movement a common set of beliefs, goals, and values, he proposes that this created a shared ethos. This ethos in turn set the platform for an understanding among the churches of expected behavior for its adherents. That these expectations were not completely universal or uniform, however, resulted in the corrections and admonitions found in letters, often between the apostles and the churches, as recorded in the New Testament. Despite these differences, this common ethos created a framework in which those in leadership could function with authority. These written charges, in addition to the personal visits of either an apostle or a member of his team, seem to be the means by which the leadership exerted control over the congregations, albeit somewhat informally.[108] Appealing strongly to the personal relationship between apostle and congregation coupled with their shared experiences, Paul would seek to persuade the readers to conform to expected norms.[109] Based on that relationship and experience, Paul would then often put the argument within a theological framework, quoting extensively from the Scriptures and appealing to the gospel as the guide for ethical behavior.[110] It is assumed that other apostles and leaders would have led and exerted control also within this common framework of belief and expected resultant behavior.[111]

Paul on occasion does refer to his position as apostle as a reason to be obeyed, and hence defended his apostolic legitimacy, but as Meeks notes he almost always backs up this assertion

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[106] Ibid., 139.

[107] As Meeks states, "When things are running smoothly, there need be little talk about authority, and outside observers may be hard put to discern the hidden means of control. That is why we have looked especially at situations of conflict, in which the question 'why should I obey?' is more likely to come into the open." Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 136, 137.

[108] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 196. Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 136.

[109] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 136.

[110] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 196-198.

[111] Witherington examines the letters of John, particularly 3 John, as another example of apostolic dealings with certain elements of the church with whom the apostle was in conflict. See Witherington III, *New Testament History,* 399.

with references to other "warrants" of authority. That he has received a special revelation, he possessed the Spirit of God, and he is a known friend worthy of their trust, were some of the other appeals to the legitimacy of his commands. Paul also appeals to the tradition of "all the churches of God"[112] (the case of the Corinthian church and the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 15:3-11) as well as the expected norms of society (the case of the man living with his father's wife).[113] Williams adds that Paul positions himself as a steward and so by implication Paul's authority is not his but is in reality the authority of his master.[114]

Perhaps it is possible to see leadership and the exercise of authority in the early Christian movement as a highly relational and flexible expression of mutual submission under the authority of the gospel. As Meeks states:

> The impression is one of great fluidity, of a complex, open-ended process of mutual discipline. Perhaps this fluid structure of authority in some measure expressed the perception, at least for Paul himself, that the crucifixion of the Messiah marked the end of the time when "the Law" shaped the limits of God's people and the beginning of the new age that would yield soon to his kingdom.[115]

This critical subject of leadership is one area that will evoke much discussion. If the scholarly consensus is correct, the early churches were happy to borrow freely from either the synagogue or other social structures (particularly the household association) and yet to retain an emphasis on role and function rather than position. Leaders were raised up to further gospel proclamation and advancement,[116] with godly character a critical factor in the recognition of anyone in a leadership role.[117]

- Patterns of mission:

Mission beyond the Jerusalem church continued with the same vision and praxis as at the beginning. Wright sees mission as an integral part of the early Christian worldview, proposing that the first believers held to the conviction that what they had discovered and now believed to be true was also true for the entire world.[118] These convictions led to action as early believers embarked on a mission to both Jews and Gentiles.[119]

Mission was often expressed in public proclamation of the claims of Christ in places as varied as synagogues (Acts 13:14, 14:1), marketplaces (Acts 17:17), public places (Acts 18:28), homes

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[112] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 138.
[113] Ibid., 139.
[114] Williams, *Stewards, Prophets, Keepers*, 55-58.
[115] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 139.
[116] Shaw, *Missional-Ecclesial Leadership*, 139.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Wright, *New Testament,* 360.
[119] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, vol. 1, 524.

(Acts 5:42), and prisons (Acts 16:25-34).[120] Though this was a method most often utilized by the apostles and evangelists, it was not to the exclusion of personal dialogue.[121] Every Christian adherent was commanded to preach the gospel (Ephesians 6:10-20) and to live lives that promoted the spreading of the message. Believers were to focus on matters useful for "advancing God's work" (1 Timothy 1:4).[122]

As Wright eloquently states:

> This missionary activity was not an addendum to a faith that was basically about something else…(and then quoting Meyer) "Christianity was never more *itself* than in the launching of the world mission."[123]

As was the case in the Jerusalem church, it is recorded that the early churches continued with an acknowledgment that they depended on the Holy Spirit for empowerment (Acts 1:4,8) and guidance (Acts 8:26,39, 10:9-16, 12:5-11, 16:6,7,9,10, 18:9-11, 27:23-26) from case to case and situation to situation. This concept pervades the New Testament writings as it describes the actions of apostles, evangelists,cowor and other early followers.[124] It is clear that the early Christian movement saw mission as primarily a spiritual enterprise.[125]

The result of this mission activity was the "making of disciples" who were then congregated into communities of faith.[126] Most notable in this undertaking were the apostles. Those that took on the role of apostle invariably gathered a team of coworkers who traveled with the apostle to shoulder the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel in new regions. After proclamation,[127] which often produced mixed results,[128] the apostolic team would establish the new community through a period of teaching (and continued evangelism). Leaders would be appointed and the apostolic team would travel to other regions (Acts 14:23, 26, Titus 1:5).[129] Clearly this was not the only means of gospel propagation, however, for the message spread through a multitude of ways as local believers obeyed the command to "preach the gospel" (Acts 8:4).[130]

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[120] For detailed discussion see Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 287-305, and Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church,* 300-355.
[121] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 47.
[122] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 148-150. Schnabel speaks of church leaders, slaves, older women, and wives all being specifically challenged to live lives that would not in any way discredit the evangelistic work of the church, but would instead enhance it.
[123] Ben F. Meyer, *The Early Christians: Their World Mission and Self Discovery* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1986), 18, as quoted by Wright, *New Testament,* 360.
[124] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 46.
[125] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 12.
[126] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 47, 48.
[127] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 248-255.
[128] Conversions (Acts 2:41, 5:14), ridicule (Acts 2:13, 17:32), persecution (Acts 7:54-60), or interest (Acts 17:32); see Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 47.
[129] Ibid., 48
[130] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 262.

Though the early Christian movement's sharing of what they perceived to be the truth has the appearance of being spontaneous and unstructured, Schnabel (and, earlier, Roland Allen)[131] has examined Paul's missional praxis and clearly identifies the strategic considerations that he and the other apostles take into account.[132] It is recorded that supernatural guidance took precedent over strategic planning (1 Corinthians 16:4-9, Acts 16:6-9, Galatians 2:2, etc.),[133] yet the consistent focus on either strategic urban centers or strategic relationships reveals a vision to reach large numbers of people through the establishment of interrelated fellowships in key locations.[134]

Bosch regards the early Christian mission movement as a political and indeed revolutionary force in the first century. Though it is evident from their writings that they had no earthly political aspirations, upon examining many early Christian teachings and attitudes Bosch regards the early Christians as unashamedly subversive. A good example is the statement that all Christians confessed, that is, "Jesus as Lord of all lords." Bosch writes that he could not imagine a more provocative political challenge, particularly considering the Roman Empire at that time. By rejecting all other gods and promoting the all-encompassing nature of God's reign, Christians undermined the very fabric of Greco-Roman social and political society.[135]

Erhardt states:

> …we should then keep in mind that revolutions are not to be evaluated in terms of the terror they spread, nor of the destruction they cause, but rather in terms of the alternatives they are able to offer.[136]

Christianity unequivocally offered alternatives. Early Christian mission displayed its revolutionary principles most clearly through the new relationships that were established between Jew and Gentile, Roman and barbarian, slave and free, rich and poor, and even male

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[131] Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* Reprint ed. (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2006), 10.
[132] Rainer Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 254-256.
[133] Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting,* 54.
[134] "Paul's missionary vision is worldwide, at least as regards the world known to him." Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 130. See also pp 129,130 regarding the use of strategic centers. Schnabel believes it is overstating the facts to say that Paul's passion was to establish new communities in urban centers, particularly strategic cities in the Mediterranean region. See Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 281. However, Ott and Wilson join with Bosch and Allen in highlighting, specifically in his later ministry, the focus that Paul seems to have on cities that were important either religiously, commercially, or regionally. It is clear he did not work intentionally in villages but rather engaged Jewish communities in key cities between Jerusalem and Rome. I find Bosch's argument the more compelling here.
[135] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 47, 48. See also N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 1065.
[136] Arnold A.T. Erhardt, *Politische Metaphysik von Solon bis Augustin* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1959), 19, quoted in Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 47.

and female.[137] In this new religion it was proposed that each were to be accepted and embraced as being of one family, an unprecedented concept in the world at that time.[138] So radical was this teaching and practice that most contemporary philosophers had no framework in which to comprehend this new movement. Simply put, as Bosch states, it was considered a "sociological impossibility."[139] And in consequence much of the reaction by society was vehemently negative.[140] Bosch points out, "It should be remembered that, during the first century, Christians were criticized for social rather than political reasons."[141]

Obviously not all reactions were negative as evidenced by the numbers of people joining this new sect.[142] The observations of some of the writers of around that period[143] were impressed by the sacrificial engagement that early Christian communities had with the poor, widows, the sick, prisoners, and other marginalized groups.[144]

> The new language on the lips of Christians was the language of love. But it was more than a language; it was a thing of power and action.[145]

Bosch is convinced that rather than being a technique to draw in more followers, this integral area of early mission was a natural outflowing of the Christian communities' faith convictions.[146] These convictions, however, were not utopian. They held to a hope that looked to the future coming of the Christ as the realization of their desires for a life in paradise. Until then injustice, poverty, and persecutions were still rampant, evidence, they believed, of the spiritual conflict raging in the world since the death and resurrection of Jesus.[147] They held that the church, fulfilling the same role that Christ undertook in his earthly ministry, was a sign pointing to the

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[137] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 48.

[138] "Luke presents a picture of the church as he thinks it should be, not so much as it really is. Yet even if his portrayal is idealized, there can be no doubt that the early Christian community did constitute a remarkable fellowship. The mutual acceptance of Jew and Gentile must have been particularly noteworthy." Ibid.*,* 121.

[139] Ibid.

[140] Bosch quotes Suetonius as saying Christianity is a "new and malevolent superstition," Tacitus saying it is "vain and insane" and thinking Christians were "reprobate characters" who had a "hatred of the human race." Ibid.*,* 48. For earlier persecution from Jews, see also Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 41-43.

[141] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 48.

[142] Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 2.

[143] Wright, *New Testament,* 359.

[144] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 48.

[145] Adolf Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries, 2 Volumes* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997), 183.

[146] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 49.

[147] Ibid. Bosch draws attention to the Aramaic expression "Marana Tha" (Our Lord, come!), a common expression in the early churches, as an example of future rather than present world utopian aspirations.

emerging Kingdom of God.[148] This sign was not always believed or accepted, again mirroring Christ's life and indicative of the nature of the church's mission to the world.

As Bosch states:

> This is, however, how authentic mission always presents itself – in weakness. As Paul says, in defiance of all logic: "It is when I am weak that I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).[149]

The gospel account reveals how the first disciples identified the Christ after his resurrection by the scars received from his execution (John 20:20, Luke 24:31), scars that he carries with him on his glorified body as a sign of suffering.[150] This suffering role was continued by the church, even to the point of death, and became an integral part of early Christian mission. "In the early church the *martyr* often had to seal his *martyria* (witness) with his blood."[151]

Distinctive also was the churches' reaction to those who persecuted them. They were called to love their enemies and do good to those who persecuted them. Klassen, in exploring this theme, firstly proposes that the Christian Scriptures define enemies as "personal, national and religious,"[152] and secondly proposes that the command to "love your enemy" is best understood "when the Christian life is seen as a continuous ministry of reconciliation flowing out of Christ's initial reconciling act (2 Corinthians 5:19)."[153] Continuing on in the same vein as Klassen, Schnabel would add that Paul's focus in Romans 12:1-15:29 suggests that the apostle saw love as the essential ingredient for effective mission and evangelism.[154]

The attitude toward suffering and death held by even the most ordinary Christ-follower became a distinctive of the early Christian movement.[155] Challenged by the apostles and other New Testament writers to be a community willing to suffer, their response to opposition was to be patient endurance (Romans 12:12, 1 Corinthians 13:7), a rejection of revenge (Matthew 5:38-42, Mark 10:42-45), and prayer for their oppressors (Luke 6:28, Romans 12:14).[156] Those who were persecuted were held in high esteem by succeeding generations and were seen as

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[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.
[150] ibid.
[151] ibid., 50.
[152] William Klassen, "The Authenticity of the Command: 'Love your Enemies,'" in *Authenticating the Words of Jesus*, eds. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 393.
[153] William Klassen, "Love Your Enemy: A Study of New Testament Teaching on Coping with an Enemy," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 37, no. 3 (1963), 147-171. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCO*host*, accessed March 25, 2016.
[154] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 142.
[155] Wright, *New Testament,* 364. See also Edward L. Smither, *Mission in the Early Church: Themes and Reflections* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 69-71.
[156] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 2, 1536, 1537. See also Dunn, *Beginning,* 1162, and Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity*, 190.

examples to be imitated as those that suffered rather than deny Christ.[157] Beyond examples to be emulated, those that suffered to the point of death (i.e. martyrs) became powerful symbols within the movement and were seen as irrefutable evidence to the truth of the claims of Christianity. Contemporary paganism and Judaism also had their own martyrs but the attitude that Christians had toward martyrdom appears to be of a different character.[158] Wright points out that the Christian, as opposed to the Stoic,[159] saw this world as essentially good and desirable but saw loyalty to the one true God even to the point of death as an act of obedience of even greater value. This was a value also shared with martyrdom within Judaism yet contained no racial or nationalistic declarations. It is well documented that early Christians did suffer, some to the point of death, and were willing and ready to do so.[160] This attitude was soon to be taken for granted among early Christians, marking them out from the surrounding pagan society.[161]

- Creating community:

In order to persist, a social organization must have boundaries, must maintain structural stability as well as flexibility, and must create a unique culture.[162] How then did the early churches maintain a distinctiveness that set them apart from not only the Hellenistic pagan culture around them but also from the Jewish community with whom it had so much in common?

Meeks, drawing on social theory of group formation, proposes a number of different indicators that demonstrated that the early church regarded itself as a people set apart. The first indicator that Meeks highlights is what he describes as the "language of belonging."[163] Terms like saints or holy ones (1 Corinthians 1:2, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Romans 1:7), elect (1 Corinthians 1:27, Ephesians 1:4), known (Romans 1:7, Colossians 3:12), as well as the language of the baptism ritual and the use of the body metaphor created among the adherents a sense of distinctiveness. So too did the intimate terms expressing love and the longing to be reunited found in the epistles. The language of belonging can also be seen in the familial terms (brother,

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[157] See Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 121-122 for examples, particularly in Luke/Acts. See Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 1, 301-303 for examples from the gospel of Matthew.
[158] Wright refers to the examples of "noble suicide" of Cato and Socrates. See Wright, *New Testament,* 364.
[159] Ibid. Wright contrasts what he regards as a cynical attitude to life held by the Stoics, and the invitation of some of its teachers to embrace suicide, with Christian martyrdom which most often was brought about by a refusal to recant and deny the Christian claims about Christ.
[160] Wright points out that evidence strongly suggests that Christians were tortured and killed for their faith from the time of the Emperor Nero onwards. The New Testament details suffering at the hand of the Jews in Palestine and elsewhere in 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16, Galatians 1:13, 4:29, 6:12, etc. See Wright, *New Testament,* 364, for further development of the argument.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 84.
[163] Ibid.*,* 85.

sister, children, etc.) that appear to be in common use among all the early believers. Meeks also believes that a monotheistic belief system centered on the person of Christ, the unique revelation that he brought, and the resulting unity that Jew and Gentile will experience through belief in him was also a significant contributing factor to the group formation of the early churches.[164] In fact it would appear that different forms of expression peculiar to the early Christian communities to convey these unique beliefs also were a means of binding the early communities even closer together.[165]

Another factor in developing a community is the use of what Meeks terms "the language of separation"[166] in an effort to distinguish between those inside of the church and those who do not belong. They are termed "the outsiders," "the world," "unbelievers," or more negatively as "unrighteous," "those despised in the church," and "those who do not know God" (1 Corinthians 5:12, 1 Corinthians 6:1,9, 1 Corinthians 6:4, 2 Corinthians 6:14). Meeks sees this type of language reinforcing a negative understanding of the outside world while encouraging and reinforcing the internal cohesion of the group.[167] Preaching focused on "once" and "but now" that is prevalent in the epistles also, in Meeks' opinion, continues to highlight the distinctive nature of the new community in Christ.[168] Adherents had been living a life of slavery and vice but now were encouraged to live lives of holiness as part of this new community. This was possibly motivated by the apostle's understanding of what he regarded as the true nature of the church.[169] As Bosch notes, "They have to behave in an exemplary way, because they are 'saints,' God's 'elect,' 'called' and 'known' by God."[170] The antagonistic attitude of society (or "the world") toward the new communities of faith only strengthened the sense of the early believers that they were separate from the world. The Jews were also included among "the outsiders" despite the strong Jewish flavor of the historical churches.[171]

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[164] Ibid., 87-91.

[165] Meeks highlights some of the distinct terminology that early Christians used. Of particular interest are the unusual foreign words such as "Abba," "Marana tha" or the Greek translation of the Hebrew word "Messiah," i.e. "Christ," which he claims would be unintelligible to an ordinary Greek speaker. He also mentions certain expressions and formulas about the death and resurrection of Christ that would have become common usage and binding among the churches. In Meeks' opinion, despite the fact that early Christians inherited much of their terminology from Judaism, they soon developed their own distinctive jargon. See Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 92-94.

[166] Ibid., 94.

[167] Ibid., 95.

[168] Ibid.

[169] Schnabel proposes that Christ as the "firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18, Revelation 1:5) is "the beginning of God's creation" (Revelation 3:14). Consequently, the people of God who belong to Jesus as his "body" belong to the new creation. This assurance implies the obligation to live as a "new creation." See Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 1, 535.

[170] Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 139.

[171] Ibid.

Physical boundaries appear to Meeks (apart from their theological foundations) to be another major contributor to community formation. “Where social boundaries are carefully guarded, we may expect to find concern about the boundaries of the body.”[172] One of these boundaries was in the area of rejecting illicit sex (though interestingly enough not particularly to the encouragement of asceticism as with other sects) by the encouragement of monogamy and, if possible, endogamy.[173] Another social boundary was the refusal to participate in the rituals of idolatry.[174] Contemporary Jewish boundaries such as the circumcision of proselytes or the prohibition of certain foods were rejected, however, as a contradiction to the new revelation that there was no distinction between Jew and Gentile.[175] The institutions of baptism and the Eucharist were also obvious boundary markers and will be discussed in the next section under ritual.

Perhaps less obvious are what Meeks describes as “autonomous institutions”[176] which provide for the members of the group services which they would otherwise have had to seek from other entities like the municipality or perhaps other previously mentioned voluntary organizations. These services would help promote the distinctiveness and the isolation of the new emerging fellowships. An example of this, according to Meeks, is the communal meal. For the poorer members of the group this provided not only food but also a social connection with various individuals up and down the social strata. Another example is the expectation of Paul (1 Corinthians 6:1-11) of the local leadership to arbitrate in civil disputes between members of the fellowship rather than have “outsiders” decide on matters of internal conflict. A third example of where the group can replace a member’s reliance on another organization or the wider culture is the body of teaching, which allows the group to come to grips with the complex world around them. These explanations and beliefs would have greatly aided the adherents as they attempted to deal with the complicated urban society of the early Roman Empire, particularly as many (but not all) were either physically or socially marginalized.[177]

> Paul and the other founders and leaders of those groups engaged aggressively in the business of creating a new social reality…They developed norms and patterns of moral admonition and social control that, however many commonplaces from the moral

[172] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 97.
[173] For his discussion on asceticism see Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 102.
[174] Meeks deals with the whole issue of "eating meat offered to idols" quite extensively within the framework of boundaries stating that the "strong" need no boundaries as it relates to the eating of meat, for they know that idols are not real. The “weak,” however, see meat-eating as participating in the worship of idols. It would appear that Meeks believes this to be a sociological rather than a theological issue. See Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 98.
[175] Ibid., 103.
[176] Ibid., 104.
[177] Ibid.

> discourses of the larger culture they might contain, still in ensemble constituted a distinctive ethos.[178]

In effect the early churches under the leadership of Paul and others created a distinct subculture within the broader Greco-Roman society.

Despite the creation of this subculture with its distinctive boundary markers there still remained access points by which others could enter and become part of the group. Unlike some other religious sects (the Essenes, for example), they were not urged to withdraw from the world or refrain from interacting with those outside the church who may be considered immoral.[179] They were encouraged instead to remain in their urban environment, living out quiet lives and working hard as members of society.[180] Even those married to pagan spouses were encouraged to preserve that marriage if at all possible.[181] Christians were charged to ensure that non-believers were allowed to attend their gatherings.[182] Not only was this lifestyle (see Colossians 3:18-4:1, Ephesians 5:21-6:9) seen as a way of countering common objections against new cults (i.e. the corruption of households) but also as a way of giving the opportunity for "outsiders" to become "insiders."[183]

The use of ritual can be understood as a way of communicating the values and beliefs of a group, consequently furthering the distinctiveness of that assembly.[184]

> It is difficult to construct and maintain deep sacred beliefs if these are not linked to sacred communities, such as the church, and to sacred rights, such as baptism, the Lord's supper, birthrights, marriages, and funerals, which give corporate expression to our faith.[185]

One of the common practices (and one which generally plays a significant part in the life of the adherents) is a regular, structured meeting. It would appear that this was also the case for the first century Christians who met throughout the ancient world. Numerous times in the New

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[178] Ibid.

[179] See Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 105, where he cites 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 as the most obvious statement regarding this point of not retreating from the world. He also refers to the "meat offered to idols" debate in 1 Corinthians 8-10 where, after defending the conscience of the "weak," the writer then defends the freedom of Christians to shop in pagan markets and eat with pagans in their homes.

[180] Schnabel points out that a good example of this is Erastus who could remain as city treasurer (Romans 16:23). See Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 238.

[181] Ibid.

[182] Ibid.

[183] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 106. "The artisan ethic of 'a quiet life,' supported by hard work and minding one's own business, has as its purpose 'that your behavior may be decent in view of the outsiders.'" See 1 Thessalonians 4:11.

[184] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 141.

[185] Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 99.

Testament they were urged to come together, but where, how often, and to do what has been discussed in other sections of this chapter.[186] Despite this lack of detail, however, two rituals, baptism and the Eucharist, were practiced, it would seem, in every congregation and had particular significance for the growing movement in its journey of self-definition.[187]

Though it is still unclear how baptism was performed by first century Christians, it fulfilled a similar function to the initiation rites required by the pagan mystery cults or the immersion of proselytes into Judaism.[188] It was most probably understood to be a public admission by the new convert of his or her sin, the need for purification, and the need for reconciliation with God, which was symbolized through the immersion in water. It also expressed a conviction that sin was forgiven on the basis of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[189] The earliest evidence seems to suggest that the name of Christ and his death and resurrection were declared from the very beginning.[190] Meeks wonders whether it could be seen as a cleansing rite with immersion, or the "bath," becoming the dividing line between the new "clean" community and the "dirty" world.[191] Certainly he sees baptism symbolizing the initiate moving from something old to something new, from death to life, from descending into ascending, from burial to enthronement, from vice to virtue, from the body of flesh to the body of Christ, etc.[192] Wright sees it as a declaration that the church was indeed the fulfillment of Israel's hope. The act of baptism drew an obvious link between the first Christians in the ancient world with the beginnings of the movement through John's baptism, communicating the concept that Christianity was indeed a Jewish sect. However, Wright sees the Christocentrism of baptism as an entry point into something far greater. He sees baptism as a declaration that the fulfillment of all God's promises are found in Christ and that by entering the Christian community the initiate enters a shared destiny for all, a destiny where Jew, Gentile, slave, free, male and female share in the promises of God. This message, in his opinion, is also found in the Eucharist.[193]

As with the ritual of baptism very little detail is known about how the first century Christians celebrated what many Protestants refer to as Holy Communion.[194] In all probability the Eucharist found in Luke's account was incorporated into a common meal and possibly into the everyday meals of families, though it appears to have assumed a more ritualistic place akin to the Jewish Passover (though celebrated at least weekly rather than annually) as time

[186] Ibid., 141-143.
[187] Wright, *New Testament,* 362, 447.
[188] Davidson, *The Birth of the Church,* 111; Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 150, 152.
[189] Davidson, *The Birth of the Church,* 111, 112; Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 230, 231.
[190] Wright, *New Testament,* 447.
[191] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 153.
[192] Ibid., 156.
[193] Wright, *New Testament,* 447.
[194] Also referred to as the "breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42) or the "Lord's Supper" (1 Corinthians 11:20).

progressed.[195] The only explicit references made to the ritual are found in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and 10:14-22, which are written to correct an abuse rather than to describe the event. Here Meeks believes that Paul is quoting a sacred formula that was used in the celebration of the Eucharist and which differs to a small extent from the accounts found in Matthew and Mark. He sees the ritual re-creating the meal of Jesus "on the night on which he was betrayed" as focusing on key moments (breaking and distributing bread, sipping and distributing wine, thanksgiving, etc.). In a similar fashion baptism, though through different imagery, also memorializes the death of Jesus, his vicarious act, and his eventual return.[196] In addition to remembering Christ's death, the Eucharist served to emphasize the unity of the community (e.g. the use of one loaf) and the separation between the community of Christ-followers and other religions. Meeks explains:

> …group solidarity entails strong boundaries. Consequently Paul uses traditional language from the supper ritual, which speaks of the bread as "communion of the body of Christ" and the "cup of blessing" as "communion of the body of Christ," to warn that any participation in pagan cultic meals would be idolatry.[197]

Thus a clear distinction between Christians and the world and a strong internal coherence is again emphasized for the community.

"…We surmise that the Pauline Christians used still other ceremonies of which we know virtually nothing."[198] Little is known of their funeral rites, though it is well documented how important those rituals were in Greek and Roman society.[199] Obviously people died during the period that the Pauline epistles were written (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), yet nothing is mentioned about funeral rites.[200] Only the baffling reference to "baptisms for the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:9) comes close. The same could be said about weddings. Perhaps it is, as Meeks surmises, that the customs were so common and well known that they did not warrant mentioning.[201]

Acts and the Pauline letters provide only tantalizing glimpses of the rituals practiced by the Pauline groups, but those glimpses are enough for us to see that they had adopted or created a rich variety of ceremonial forms. There is a striking mix of the free and the customary, familiar and novel, simple and complex, in what we can see of their meetings. The…unbeliever entering one of these meetings might have thought them a bit odd, but would have recognized them as

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[195] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 1, 145; Wright, *New Testament,* 448.
[196] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 158.
[197] Ibid.*,* 159.
[198] Ibid.*,* 162.
[199] J.M.C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1996), 33, 34.
[200] H. Richard Rutherford, *The Death of a Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals*, Revised ed. (Collegeville: Pueblo Books, 1991), 33, 34.
[201] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 162.

a cultic community of some kind."[202] Just as the Jewish symbols of the temple, the Torah, the land, and ethnic identity defined the Jewish population as distinct from the pagan society around them, so Christians adhered to a set of symbols that celebrated their distinctiveness.[203] While understandably rejecting pagan symbols like the offering of incense to Caesar, revering oracles, admiring statues of gods, heroes and emperors, or avoiding the gladiatorial shows, etc., the early church movement also notably distanced themselves from Jewish symbolism.[204] They reinterpreted the Torah (as well as the Psalms and Prophets) as an apologetic pointing to the coming Christ who fulfilled the destiny of Israel and opened the way for the Gentiles to enter the community. The temple became a metaphor for the church and for Jesus himself. As would be expected for a community that sought the "becoming one" of all nations, the land no longer held any geographical significance. In the same manner neither did Jewish ethnicity, though it is also evident that Paul resisted turning the early church into a non-Jewish movement.[205]

The early Christian churches embraced other symbols. Wright outlined a number of them with a suggested central symbol being the cross. He proposes that by the time of Justin Martyr the cross, despite its identification with the horror of crucifixion, was universally accepted as a Christian symbol across the pan-church movement.[206] Its wide acceptance at that time would suggest a possible early adoption within the fellowships.

> "…They grasped it to themselves as the paradoxical truth by which the world was saved. Within a short time, the cross became the central Christian symbol, easy to draw, hard to forget, pregnant both in its reference to Jesus himself and in its multiple significance for his followers."[207]

Wright also proposes that the early church missionary enterprise was not only an undertaking arising out of perceived obedience to Christ but was also rich with symbolism. It had at its foundation the premise that Jesus Christ, the Lord of the earth, claimed allegiance from every tribe and nation. In the same vein the church symbolized the creation of a new family that transcended ethnic considerations and allegiances and replaced Jewish ethnicity and nationalism. Again the instructions for personal behavior and ethics laid down in the New Testament and other early writings,[208] he suggests, take the symbolic place of the Torah in Judaism and outline a code of behavior for all people everywhere. Continuing in his examination of early Christian symbolism, Wright proposes the replacement of the temple as mentioned previously by Jesus and his church. Early Christians taught that Jesus incarnated the living

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[202] Ibid., 163.
[203] Wright, *New Testament,* 366.
[204] Ibid., 365.
[205] Ibid., 366.
[206] 100-165 A.D.
[207] Wright, *New Testament,* 367.
[208] E.g. Didache.

presence of God and sent his living Spirit to dwell in the communities of faith expressed in local churches, effectively replacing the geographical and theological place held by the temple.[209]

Wright also sees the early creeds and the baptismal confessions that supported them not as mere abstract theological statements but rather as powerful symbols that helped define the early Christian communities as a separate people that worshipped God in a unique way. He states, "From the start, Christian creeds were not so much a matter of 'faith seeking understanding' as 'community seeking definition.'"[210]

The first churches sought to create distinct communities in society separate from the pagan temple and in some ways also from the synagogue. Creating distinct new communities was an imperative dictated by the new social reality that was being proclaimed in the gospel. While some see the seeds of this new community even back in the Jerusalem community,[211] others see it as a later development advanced by the Hellenized Jews and Gentile believers gathered in Antioch.[212] According to the latter theory, the Hebraic Christ-followers were in conflict with the church in Antioch, who seemed to embrace a more radical expression of the new social reality in Christ.[213] The conservative Hebraic community, accustomed to welcoming proselytes into Judaism, were willing (reluctantly?) to receive Gentiles into the new churches if they were to become more Jewish (circumcision, dietary laws, etc.).[214] The Council meeting described in Acts 15 and the subsequent clashes in Galatians 2 reflected that tension. That there was a conflict within the early churches is clear but whether this new social reality was a later agenda pushed by Paul and the Antioch church or rather was a vision carried by the twelve and other early believers even back in Jerusalem is a matter for debate.[215] Certainly it is helpful to reiterate Dunn's observation regarding the diversity found within the early Christian movement and, though it probably is not as clear-cut as Bosch asserts, I would suggest that both arguments are plausible within that diversity.[216]

Symbols joined with ritual, language, etc., helped define the early Christian movement expressed locally and pan-geographically as a new community distinct both from Judaism and the wider pagan society that surrounded them. I believe a synthesis of scholarly writing on the

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[209] Wright, *New Testament,* 368. He also refers to the New Testament examples of 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19, Romans 8:9.
[210] Ibid., 367.
[211] See Wright, *New Testament,* 108.
[212] See Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 44.
[213] Ibid., 43.
[214] Ibid., 42.
[215] I find Schnabel's argument more convincing than Bosch's (who sees Gentile mission as mainly the vision of Paul and the Antioch church) as Schnabel describes various incidents where it is clear that the "twelve" were engaging in proclamation to Gentiles. See Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 41-46, and Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 1, 434-437.
[216] Dunn, *Beginning,* 16.

New Testament has not only helped to sketch out what these new communities did but also how they were able to create their distinctiveness. I will now examine how Wright believes these rituals, symbols, and narratives possibly reveal why these new communities were formed and why they lived life the way they did.

Early Christian worldview as proposed by Wright

Wright proposes that this formation of the new community through ritual, practice, symbol, and story had its roots in the way that this new community saw themselves and saw the world. Essentially their praxis flowed out of their worldview.[217] Defining a worldview as "…the basic stuff of human existence, the lens through which the world is seen, the blueprint for how one should live in it, and above all a sense of identity and place which enables human beings to be what they are."[218]

Wright spends considerable time examining these areas of narrative, practice, symbol, and ritual etc., to construct a suggested worldview held by the early churches.[219] Despite the extensive detail of Wright's work,[220] I believe this study would be best served by focusing its attention on the proposed answers given to the four fundamental questions of human existence often used to construct worldviews. These questions are: who are we, where are we, what is wrong, and what is the solution?[221]

> People who take for granted that they will act within the world in these sorts of ways, and who see the world through the lens of the symbols, clearly believe certain things about themselves and the world which suggest particular answers to the key questions.[222]

Who are we? Wright proposes that the early Christians saw themselves essentially as a new community and a new movement. Yet this new movement retained its connections to the old through its claim to be the true followers of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They saw themselves as the fulfillment of the plan that God was following in his dealings with Israel. They were unequivocally monotheistic and, like Israel, were distinct from the pagan polytheistic society around them by their adherence to the traditions of the Jews. However, they were also distinct from the Jewish community because of their unwavering belief in the crucified Jesus,

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[217] Wright, *New Testament,* 359.
[218] Ibid.*,* 124.
[219] Ibid.*,* 123.
[220] See Wright*, New Testament,* 341-464.
[221] Ibid.*,* 123. Wright bases his understanding of worldview on the works of Geertz, Holmes, Walsh and Middleton, and others.
[222] Ibid.*,* 369.

the giving of the divine Spirit to the church, and the bringing together of Jew and Gentile in fellowship through Christ.[223]

Where are we? Wright continues by suggesting that early Christians saw themselves dwelling in a world created by the God whom they worshipped but in the midst of a society that did not recognize him. The society worshipped idols that parodied the revealed truth and that gave the worshippers of those idols a vague and distorted glimpse of reality. Those gods enslaved their worshippers and deceived them into patterns of behavior that were both degrading and dehumanizing. Because of the church's rejection of both these idols and their worship, society persecuted the followers of Jesus. The conduct of the church reminded the contemporary power structures surrounding it that there was a different way to be human and that through the coming of Jesus a declaration has been made that their power is not absolute.[224]

What is wrong? The early Christians, according to Wright, saw the primary issue to be addressed in the world as the continued rule of the powers of paganism. These powers, which sometimes could be identified as satanic or demonic, not only dominated the world but also invaded the church on occasion. The result was persecution from the society outside the church and heresy and division within. Even the individual believer was not immune from attack and there was still a battle to be fought and forces to be overcome, lusts to be mortified, and party-spirits to be brought under the discipline of humility.[225]

What is the solution? The solution is found in the realization of Israel's hope. The one true God has acted through the death and resurrection of the true King Jesus, the Jewish Messiah come to defeat the pagan gods and rescue the world from evil. This victory is not yet complete. However, he has created a new people through whom he continues to implement his victory on earth as he acts through them and through his Spirit. One day King Jesus will return to judge the world and establish a new kingdom different from all kingdoms in the world. Those that have died believing in Christ will be raised back to physical life and the powers of paganism will be compelled to acknowledge that King Jesus is the true Lord of all creation. At that time justice and peace will triumph.[226]

As in the previous section on community this constructed worldview as proposed by Wright may lead to some interesting lines of enquiry. How do the new emerging churches see themselves and how does this influence their practice of mission and community formation?

[223] Ibid.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid., 370.

Conclusion

From the first round of interviews with adherents of the four emerging churches from Muslim background questions were raised concerning missional praxis and community formation. Those questions were then used as the basis for an investigation into the work of a number of New Testament scholars who have written about early church mission, worship, and community. An attempt has been made to synthesize their writings to compile a possible description of the early church during the apostolic age. In this chapter, leadership structures both in Jerusalem and the Pauline churches were examined, as well as how they used language, rituals, and symbols to shape community in those churches. In addition, types of social structures they may have borrowed to aid them in community formation were examined, as well as a possible worldview for the early church as proposed by Wright. This description will be used to guide the path of enquiry for the second round of interviews.

Muslim Voices in Context II

A Further Conversation with Five Emerging Fellowships of Non-Christian Background Believers

Introduction

The following section reports on the second round of interviews. After completing the exploration of the early church movement through the eyes of contemporary scholarship, questions influenced by the study then helped craft this round of interviews. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with interviewees from the original four (now five) fellowships or networks. All of those interviewed were leaders of the churches or church networks. Questions were framed around topics such as community formation, missional engagement, and the choosing and establishing of leaders. Space is also given to investigating each fellowship's self-description, their attitude to suffering, and in what ways they believe that they are distinct from the surrounding society. Responses are also elicited as to why the interviewees and their churches do what they do and believe what they believe.

The aim of this section is to give a detailed summary of each of the interviews and to identify the themes common to all five of the particular contexts. Those common themes will be the basis for the section "Conversations with the Early Church Movement" and will give a framework for that discussion and critique.

The Mountain Church

Introduction

I returned to conduct a second interview in April 2015 with the leader of the Mountain Church, Raed. The interview lasted a little under one hour and twenty-five minutes and was conducted in the semi-structured interview format. Asked questions that were based on the Early Church Movement study, Raed discussed issues to do with church growth, mission strategy, community and leadership. The interview questions can be found in the Appendix. The following is a detailed summary of that interview.

Description

- Update:

The Mountain Church has faced some interesting challenges since the first round of interviews. The most significant of these challenges has been a church split, with a gifted leader (Rashid,

who was a participant in the first round of interviews) and some families leaving the mountain fellowship and beginning their own congregation on another mountain. Rashid, who leads that breakaway community, has been interviewed separately to Raed.

Raed estimates that the Mountain Church has a relational network involving around 100 families. Attendance on a Sunday morning, when they usually meet, is around 35 to 40 people. These are mainly Druze, some Christians, with two Sunni families also attending.[1] There is one home group that meets during the week[2] and a Thursday night meeting of 35 refugees who do not attend the Sunday morning gathering.[3] The group continues in their practice of worship, an open time of sharing and prayer, and then a time of teaching usually given by Raed. After the teaching time, the adherents gather around tables (often the youth will gather by themselves with the more senior members at another table) to discuss the content of the teaching, its validity, and its practical outworking. They continue to regularly eat together, often spending the afternoon after the Sunday service eating and fellowshipping. Raed, as the head shepherd, is encouraged by how he believes the fellowship is progressing. He sees a high degree of unity and common purpose, "people are using their gifts," and they are "learning to listen to the voice of God" as a community. He is quite confident that the fellowship would continue on even if he would have to leave for some reason.[4] There is a leadership team with Raed that helps guide the fellowship and related community engagement activities.

- The shape of community:

As observed in the opening descriptive paragraphs, the Mountain Church is highly relational. The members spend much time with each other, either after the weekly gathering and midweek meetings, or through visiting each other's homes. Raed observes that people do this with the goal of getting to know one another and deepening their relationships. Raed would see this as primarily a cultural expression of community. As noted in the first round of interviews, they

[1] In the first round of interviews it was reported that there were Shiites regularly attending the gatherings, but at present that is not the case.

[2] This is less than what was observed in the first round of interviews. One home group was lost to the church split, and other families were sent to other churches or were encouraged to start their own fellowship in the region. Raed: "At the moment we have one here in ____and that's it. No, the ____ group…we sent them to other churches, they went to other churches. And we're happy to do that. And there's another group that, I think they are forming a meeting by themselves. It's not under our supervision. We spun them off because we want to further train the shepherd leaders." The reasons will be examined later in the chapter.

[3] Raed: "So probably, what, 100 families or something like that. Sunday morning we'd have about 35, 40. We have about 8 Syrians coming, we have 2 complete families that come and attend – husband, wife and children. We have 3 families that are wife and children alone. And we have some, one or two men that attend on Sunday. Now Thursday night we have 35 Syrians that don't attend on Sunday. They come, and they come regularly, some of them for 2 years now. And so, yeah, we're seeing some of them come to Christ, finally they are starting to understand and they're starting to want to serve. That has become a significant part of our church."

[4] Raed: "If we were to leave, you know, my family, if we were to leave Lebanon, I think the church will go on without us and I think that's a good healthy sign."

describe themselves not as the Mountain Church but rather as "the Lord's family" and familial words came up often in the interview.[5] This concept and indeed value has had a profound influence in the shaping of the Mountain Church community.

The Mountain Church has adopted a social rather than a religious model for their spiritual community. Though to the casual observer the forms used on a Sunday morning in their regular gatherings differ little from the equivalent contemporary evangelical (Presbyterian, Baptist, Church of God, etc.) worship services conducted in Beirut, the actual shape of the community is far different.[6] Defining themselves as family and conducting their everyday interactions along the lines of a Druze clan allows the faith community to reorient their identity and resultant loyalties within the wider Druze community and brings solidarity, particularly as they seek to live out the teachings of Christ. Seeing critical and challenging issues, like one's attitude toward the state of Israel, through a tribal rather than a nationalistic lens also allows the community to legitimately apply the teachings of Christ in a reasonable, contextually acceptable, and emotionally satisfying manner.[7]

Raed sees the church as a family that is part of the wider "tribe of Jesus."[8] This family has, as a value, open and honest relationships, speaking frankly as one would in one's biological family. In this vein the church split, which will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter, was talked about openly by the leadership with the remaining adherents despite the pain that was

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[5] Raed uses the word "family" 36 times in the second round of interviews, in a variety of contexts. For example: "we're a small church that is very much connected as a family" and "there are two families in this whole world – there is God's family and the world's family or Satan's family. And it doesn't matter what you are – a Jew, a Greek, whatever the passport that you carry, whatever the ethnic, physical race is, it's your spirit that determines what family you belong to, your spiritual standing with God. So if your spiritual standing with God is saved by grace through Jesus Christ, then you are in the family of God; everybody else are not" and "…. we would not consider somebody (for leadership) unless they have publicly announced their faith to their family. And they really need to have a good relationship with their family. If somebody has a bad relationship and they're doing it in spite of their family, we're only causing them more trouble by appointing them to be leaders."

[6] Though outside the bounds of this study, it would appear that the existing evangelical denominations, in congregations that were established by Western missionaries in the last 180 years, would tend to operate as voluntary associations, as would be typically found in North America or Europe. See Ott and Wilson, *Global Church Planting*, 115, 116.

[7] Raed states: "Many people come with this 'but the Bible is not for us, the Bible is against the Arabs.' And we as Arabs were rejected…you know you're almost betraying the Arab heritage. And you know for Christ it's worth it, to betray, but it's not true, I'm not betraying anybody. Has Christ asked me to betray anybody? Quite the opposite, he loves us. And this theme is very, very true, it carries through the whole Scripture. So it does help me, especially now with the Syrians coming in, who like have been so indoctrinated. For them it's like gravity. Nobody argues with gravity, nobody argues that Israel is bad. Nobody – there is no argument. But now we come with the teachings of Jesus Christ saying 'love Israel.' Are we agents for Israel? Are we traitors or betrayers of our country? No, not at all…. We can very, very confidently say we are children of Abraham and we're going to love the whole world, Jew and Greek and Gentile and no matter who. Our identity has changed. Instead of a national or ethnic belonging, now our tribe is a spiritual tribe belonging to Jesus Christ. He is the patriarch."

[8] See previous footnote.

the natural result of the broken relationships. Raed saw this as somewhat countercultural to the usual approach to dealing with conflict in the Druze villages in the mountains.

Living upright and exemplary lives according to the teachings of the gospels and the epistles was also framed within this familial paradigm. Mountain Church members are expected to be people of good character imitating their "heavenly father," similarly to sons and daughters being exhorted to follow in the footsteps of and imitate their parents. People are very involved in each other's lives and will often help each other in clear, tangible ways. Raed relates how some, particularly the leadership, will help different members financially when they encounter difficulties and gives an example of helping one adherent with his dental bills.[9] Though he sees this as contrary to the conventional Western mission methodology that he has been taught, yet he feels that within his cultural context this conventional methodology does not apply. Instead he sees people helping each other financially according to need as a practical way of expressing concern and "bearing one another's burdens"[10] and certainly not contrary to his understanding of the biblical text. Raed even speaks of this using familial language in reference to his own dealings with people in the fellowship:

> …the Lord just puts on my heart that I need to help that person. And I'm responsible for them as part of my family. It's like Boaz spreading his blanket on Ruth. So we just flip the blanket…we just spread it a little bit further.

Whether helping people financially is unwise according to Raed's Western influence[11] or not, it certainly fits within the paradigm of church as family that the Mountain Church is seeking to model. Raed states that some of the attendees, even some older than he, have expressed that he is like a father to them. He sees this as a high compliment, one which expresses deep respect and communicates their submission to him. Raed feels that these statements flow out of the need that many have for affection and love. He states, "Eventually they love you and respect you and will want to do as you say."

Certainly this appears to fit within the paradigm of family, perhaps even within the concept of patriarch and clan. From the interview it is apparent that Raed sees the dangerous aspect to this level of submission, particularly if he is perceived as spiritual leader, advisor, advocate, and a source of material help in time of need. He relates how he emphasizes regularly in his teaching that he has no actual authority over them, often saying something similar to the following

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[9] Raed: "Instead of signing surety on a loan, just give it to them. You know what I mean? So that's one of the ways that we start to feel, is when we start to carry one another's burden, when I start to worry about somebody's teeth, and I fix their teeth."

[10] Galatians 6:2.

[11] Raed spent many years in the USA studying in university and pursuing a career. He also has advanced degrees from Western institutions. Refer to first-round interviews for more information.

statement, "…the way God uses me in your life, if you see any use for that then do it. If you don't, then don't worry about it."

Raed believes that God continues to authenticate his leadership position by giving him wisdom as he advises people in the Mountain Church. It appears to him that when people don't follow his advice then things do not go well and he considers this as "God prospering my advice." He will often take one to three weeks to think over an answer. The issues that he deals with appeared to be quite varied and complex, ranging from spiritual issues and family concerns to business ventures. Raed expressed that he was happy to vacate this role whenever he felt he was able to step down.

Although it is clear that Raed is the main leader, others in the congregation are also recognized as functioning in that role. In the interview he communicated different areas where others on the leadership team serve and give direction. These areas are as varied as counseling, marriage coaching, leading small groups, worship, etc., and as people are helped then that leadership ability is affirmed. The leadership style is very relational rather than positional, coaching rather than authoritarian. He believes that there is unity of vision and purpose in the leadership team and describes them as "all singing off the same hymn sheet." They are united in communicating to the attendees of the Mountain Church the importance of character, loving one another, being a family, and being engaged in mission and witness to the wider Druze community. Though women can lead (as part of a team), preach, and lead worship and public prayers, they cannot be elders. Raed defines elder as someone that would have spiritual or organizational authority and believes that women, though equal to men, have differing roles to perform. Primarily this is modeled on Raed's understanding of the biblical text concerning the role of women in the household, and as the church is understood by the Druze leadership as "God's household," then the same principles apply, in his opinion. It would appear that he leans toward the complementarian understanding of gender in the Old and New Testaments. Raed also sees that this model of church leadership fits in well with the Druze culture within which the church exists and the community with which it attempts to engage.

Raed observes that new leaders are developing from within the congregation, particularly in the area of starting or leading small house groups, other meetings in the church, and other related church ministries to the community. He sees this as a healthy and encouraging sign for the future. The core leadership team is focusing on developing leaders and would choose people who show the ability to take some responsibility for a particular ministry focus. After proving themselves able to perform at that level, more responsibility is given. Before a leader is elevated into that position, the core leadership team (or some of them) focuses on developing a closer relationship with that potential leader. After discussion with the core leadership team regarding

that particular individual assuming a leadership role, consensus[12] is reached and the person is approached and encouraged to take on a responsibility.

There are criteria for one to be considered for a leadership role in the Mountain Church. The candidate needs to have publicly announced to his (or her) family his belief in and submission to the faith claims of Christ and his teachings. The candidate also needs to have maintained or restored good relationships with his or her immediate family. Raed believes that assuming a leadership role in the church while one has bad family relationships only exacerbates the relational issues and causes a lot of problems for that person.[13] The candidate needs to have faced persecution for their faith convictions and to have remained firm in those convictions. He or she also needs to have maintained a good reputation in the community. Raed gives an example of one gifted individual who was a potential leader who coincidentally also owed money to someone in the community. Despite being in dire need of a reliable vehicle, he was counseled by the church leadership to pay off his debt before purchasing a different car. This advice was given with the aim of maintaining that man's reputation in the community. Interestingly, Raed communicated that his expectation is that everyone in the Mountain Church eventually becomes a leader of some sort.

The Mountain Church takes a position of being very sensitive to visitors from the wider community, those who are visiting them for their Sunday morning gathering. Because they meet in a school, a public place without restricted access, they do have people regularly visiting. In consequence there are no Christian symbols such as crosses or a communion table displayed inside or outside the meeting area. Their reasoning for this is to try and minimize anything that would be understood to be offensive by the wider community. "If they stumble, let them stumble over the deity of Christ, not over a symbol or a piece of wood," Raed states. They maintain culturally appropriate social distance between the sexes (men and women do not

[12] The core leadership team consists of a number of couples and one elderly Druze widow. In the light of Raed's seemingly complementarian views, there may appear to be a question of consistency, particularly if on some decisions (such as choosing leadership) a consensus needs to be reached. Ostensibly then a scenario could be conceived where one of the women on the core leadership team is in disagreement with the remainder, consensus is not reached, and a decision is made regarding a particular person's suitability for leadership. In effect it would appear that in this instance that that particular woman is holding authority over men. However, a key area for further examination is the understanding of the word "consensus" as compared to the word "unanimous." It is conceivable that consensus could be reached with somebody not being in favor but willing to accept the decision of the wider body. Unfortunately this was not explored in the interview and so remains a subject for speculation.

[13] Raed explains his thinking in the interview: "If somebody has a bad relationship and they're doing it in spite of their family, we're only causing them more trouble by appointing them to be leaders. I know this doesn't sound (good)….are you saying that God is only going to use the people who are on good terms with their families? With us…yes. We just chose to select for that. Because our approach is family. And I think to reach the very heart of this society, you (have to) go with the mainstream family."

shake hands, for instance) and regular attendees from Sunni Muslim background are allowed to continue wearing the *hijab.*[14]

The celebration of the Eucharist is also an open affair. Unlike other Christian faith communities[15] that would only serve the elements to baptized members of the congregation or perhaps to regular attendees, the Mountain Church, after explaining the spiritual significance of "the Lord's table,"[16] allows whoever wishes to partake. Raed explained the reasoning behind this. As a community they desire to be open and transparent in all they do, particularly in the Sunday morning gathering. This is perhaps in reaction to the secretive nature of the Druze religion but possibly could also be an indication of the open attitude that the Mountain Church has toward the wider society and the desire they have to welcome visitors and for those visitors to know and understand them. This desire for transparency dictates that the ritual of communion cannot be performed behind closed doors[17] and, as the leadership believe that it is culturally inappropriate (or even offensive)[18] not to serve everyone present in the meeting, they allow any and all to partake if that individual so desires. This is done after a clear explanation of the meaning and significance of the ritual as well as a warning not to share in the ritual if one is persisting in unrepentant sin.

This is not to say that the Mountain Church is without boundaries that define them as a community. Even though the ritual of the Eucharist is open and inclusive, another common Christian ritual, baptism, is most definitely not. Not everyone who asks for baptism is baptized. Unlike the Mountain Church's initial common practice the applicant now has to fulfill certain requirements before undertaking the ritual. The primary step to be taken is for the applicant to announce their new faith convictions to their family. This is not to be done only at the baptism itself but before the ritual is performed. If the applicant is still walking true to their faith

[14] Within the context of Islam a *hijab* is a scarf worn in a particular manner that conveys to the wider society that that woman is devout and modest.
[15] E.g. City Church.
[16] English translation of the commonly used expression among Protestants (and the Mountain Church) for the Eucharist *ma'idat irrubb.*
[17] In the Village Church interview, it was observed by the lead church planter that secret meetings or rituals in his context also implied that something shameful was happening in those meetings. One could ask if some similar sentiment is influencing the Mountain Church to make definite steps to be open and transparent in their meetings and rituals. Raed states: "So we tell them, hey, look, we're going to take care of some private business here, but it's nothing to be ashamed of, we'll do it right in front of you."
[18] In Lebanese culture to serve some but not others in a home or a meeting implies that the person not served is at best not welcome or in some cases is regarded as an enemy. Raed says: "Well, you know, in culture, if you tell somebody no, don't eat this, it's kind of inhospitable. And I don't think the Lord intended this (the Eucharist) to be a way to separate us."

convictions after explaining them to their family, then they are permitted to proceed with baptism.[19]

Another act that defines this community as different from the wider Druze society is the rejection of all Druze religious practices. This results in practices as varied as not venerating Druze *mashayakh*[20] by not hanging their pictures in their homes to the burning of all amulets and charms used to ward off evil spirits. Raed notes that even though new attendees are exposed to the Mountain Church's stance regarding Druze religious practices, he usually finds it takes about six to nine months of regular participation in church life before an adherent will bring out all their amulets and charms for burning.[21] This rejection of Druze religious practices is causing the attendees to start re-evaluating some of the common societal and religious practices with which they have grown up. Even though they attend weddings and funerals performed by the *mashayakh* they are now starting to have their own wedding ceremonies in the church performed by the Mountain Church leadership. This is in addition to the traditional, government-recognized Druze religious ceremony.[22] They as of yet have not come up with a satisfactory solution to the perceived dilemma of being buried with Druze ceremony in a Druze graveyard.

What is described above is a community that regularly meets in a publicly accessible place, both as a wider congregation and as small groups in homes. The community seems friendly and open to new people attending and seeks to be sensitive to visitors from every background. Certainly from a leadership point of view having visitors come and attend for a period not only is a reflection of who they are as a welcoming community but also would fit in with the broad vision of the Mountain Church being one that reaches out to the wider community. In the interview Raed was asked how people who begin to attend move from being a visitor to being an accepted member of the Mountain Church. There is obviously no official membership roll. Raed

[19] Raed states: "As for baptism, just say, we have very clear criteria who we baptize. We don't baptize (just) anybody who wants to be baptized, and we used to at first. But now anybody who wants to be baptized has to have announced their faith publicly – not just at the river where we baptize, but before, to their family. We want them to at least have their family know that they are believers. So if they have done that, and they're still walking with God, with Christ, then we do baptize them. Again, because that is the purpose of the baptism, is to make publicly known that he is a believer, or she is a believer."

[20] Druze religious leaders.

[21] Raed states: "We would never hang one of those ribbons from Ayoub (Job), we would never have a hijab. It's the incantation which they write on the piece of paper and they fold it, it's all satanic. And they hang it in with stitching in a leather pouch and they wear it around their neck or somewhere on their body for the rest of their life. And if they ever open it, which they never do, they'll see really all satanic stuff. And so those, we ask people when they come, do you have any of these in your home? And many of them do, and we tell them you need to bring them out and throw them away or burn them. And you know, within 6 to 9 months they'll do that. Another thing is we don't hang pictures of honored sheikhs and the Druze."

[22] There are no civil weddings in this particular country where the church has been established. All such ceremonies have to be performed by one of the recognized religious sects.

described a very fluid and intuitive process, highly relational as one would expect as an outside observer of the Mountain Church, a process which is informal and involves a sense of commitment by both the leadership and the new attendee. He describes a process where the new attendee has increased contact with the core group, not only through regular attendance at the Sunday morning gathering, but also in other meetings during the week and socially visiting the adherents. These new attendees also begin to express a desire to serve in the various functions of the church and begin to regard the fellowship as something in which they are invested. From the leadership side they begin to sense that these people are part of their responsibility and are people that they should take care of spiritually, relationally, and physically. This highly intuitive process is not done by a leader in isolation but in discussion with the others in the leadership team and also with other more mature members who bring people and take them under their wing.[23]

The commitment to community life was sorely tested with a severe relational break with the other main leader of the mountain fellowship. The root cause of the conflict was never clearly articulated in the interview (nor in the interview with Rashid, the other party in the split) but it did lead to Raed asking Rashid to leave the leadership team for a time. Rather than continue to attend the mountain fellowship, Rashid and his family decided to leave and start their own meeting on a different mountain and, according to Raed, invited families from the mountain fellowship to leave that church and join theirs. Rashid gives another side to the story as will be shown in his interview but it would appear that this point, that of inviting other families to join the new venture, was the one most hurtful to Raed. This would be understandable in any context but with the strong perception that the Mountain Church maintains that it is a family, part of a larger tribe (of Jesus), leaving and asking others to leave also can be regarded as a betrayal. Raed has talked openly with the congregation about their own personal hurts and allowed the congregation to give voice to their concerns and feelings. The leadership has decided to refrain from reconciliation with Rashid and his family, despite his attempts to restore the relationship, until Rashid repents of his actions, particularly in the area of asking other adherents to join his new church.

[23] Raed: "Our contact with them outside of Sunday will increase and they will start joining us on visits; we just see them more often. And then they would express an interest, we had like one lady, she just insisted for two months, I need to serve….. And so we have others that serve in different ways, they're now going out to distribute. They're reaching out themselves. From their point of view they would start serving and then they regard themselves as they've invested something. And then consider themselves more free to just walk in here. But from our point of view we consider them as part of the group when we feel that they are part of our responsibility now. That we're responsible to feed them, to take care of them…for me personally, the Lord just puts on my heart that I need to help that person. And I'm responsible for them as part of my family. There are people that will never make it into the group. Because you can tell they are coming for some reason – they want a job and they don't really care about spiritual things. They will come three or four times and then they leave. So, it is quite intuitive…"

Meeks proposes that it is possible to gain insight into the workings of a leadership structure when it is examined during a time of conflict.[24] That situation has been afforded to this research and Raed sadly recounted the emotional and relational split that the Mountain Church experienced in the 12 months leading up to the second round of interviews. Rashid was a senior member of the leadership team and appears to be in his own right a patriarchal figure like Raed. He is a general surgeon, mature in his faith convictions, has suffered persecution for those convictions and yet has maintained a good relationship with his extended family, and appears to be a natural leader in the wider Druze community. For a reason undisclosed in either interview, Rashid was asked by Raed to step down from being part of the church leadership team. According to Rashid he was asked to withdraw from leadership for a period of three years and was completely confused as to the reason for this request.[25] This removal from leadership, despite having attended the fellowship for twelve years, left him "frustrated and a little angry" and consequently resulted in he and his family leaving the fellowship. Raed, in his account, states that Rashid left the church and does not expand on his reasons for removing Rashid from leadership.[26] According to Raed, Rashid then began asking different families within the Mountain Church to join his new fellowship that he established in his home on a different mountain. Rashid's account is that the families came to him rather than the other way around. Despite the differing accounts the resulting action by the mountain fellowship leadership was ostracism from the leadership and the church. Despite Rashid's continued overtures to reestablish relationship, the Mountain Church has cut him off relationally until, as Raed says, "a season of repentance."[27]

A distinctive of the Mountain Church is its corporate attitude to suffering, particularly as a result of their belief in and adherence to the teachings of Christ. Raed reports that many in the church have suffered at least a period of ostracism from family and community, with some suffering much more. The Mountain Church adherents see persecution as something that is character building and a means that is used by God to shape their lives to be more similar to the earthly life of Christ. Despite this belief, however, they do not seek persecution and try to minimize

[24] Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 113.

[25] Rashid states: "I don't know why, he (Raed) tells us to leave the church. I don't know why. Or take a sabbatical for 3 years. First of all I don't know what a sabbatical is! And then they asked me to leave for 3 years! What's the reason?"

[26] In consequent conversations with Raed about this incident, no mention of any of the usual reasons for church discipline (drunkenness, adultery, financial misdealing, etc.) were made as context for Rashid's removal from office.

[27] Raed says: "The difference of the last year is that we had a stressful situation that someone very close, within the team, has decided to leave. And that alone was not the problem, the problem was that they tried to break up the church after that by calling people in, kind of asking them to just join them. And I think one or 2 families responded to that, most everyone else did not. But it stays kind of a painful thing because we love them very much, and our natural instinct is just to reach out to them and want to forgive and forget everything, but the fact is that they have not repented yet. And so the Bible clearly teaches, you know…And I think there is a season of repentance."

negative reactions with wisdom. If, on the other hand, persecution does come as a result of their faith beliefs, something that they regard as normal, they embrace it.

- Patterns of mission:

Interestingly, Raed describes the Mountain Church as being closer to a "sodality" than a "modality."[28] He sees his church as one that would not be consuming time and energy attracting as many people as possible to the Sunday morning gathering (he gives the example of having a dynamic children's program to achieve this aim)[29] but rather is focused on reaching Druze people and spending time with those fewer people that appear to be seriously exploring the Christian faith. He states, "We are not really welcoming a whole lot of just visitors. You just really got to get serious with God to stay with this group." Despite this single-mindedness, however, the fellowship has been heavily involved in a relief effort to refugees, most of whom are from the majority Sunni branch of Islam. This effort has also resulted in the previously mentioned Thursday night meeting hosted and organized by the mountain fellowship but mainly attended by refugees. Perhaps this illustrates Raed's modality/sodality tension as the desire for focus meets the realities of need and response. Nevertheless, Raed clearly communicates his desire for a focused missional engagement rather than a "come one, come all" strategy.

Raed communicated in the interview that there has been a strong missional emphasis in the teaching of the church, stressing not only their corporate responsibility but also the role that each adherent has in this commission.[30] After undertaking a survey of the congregation that he leads, he estimates that 25% of the adherents (15 respondents) have a strong missional conviction. The majority of those that hold these convictions are among the eldership. There

[28] I understood from the interview that Raed is using these terms as they would be used in a Protestant mission conversation. Ralph Winter defines them thus: "…a modality is a structured fellowship in which there is no distinction of sex or age, while a sodality is a structured fellowship in which membership involves a second decision beyond modality membership, and is limited by either age or sex or marital status. In this use of these terms, both the *denomination* and the *local congregation* are modalities while a mission agency or local men's club are sodalities." Ralph D. Winter, "Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission," *Missiology* 2, no. 1 (1974): 121-139. Some stretching of Winter's definition needs to be made to accommodate Raed's assertion.

[29] Raed: "In terms of numbers, I'm starting to understand us more as a sodality than a modality, to use Ralph Winter's terminology. We're a lot more of a sodality church, we're not, you know, bring the kids for Sunday school and all the programs, although we have that, we do that. But I'm sure other churches do it much better than we do, I mean they have a better music program, I'm sure, and they've got a really great Sunday school set-up. And I would send my kids there if I were just the average Joe. But our church is so geared, and we need to be because we're in the Druze community and we're the only ones, we have to be reproductive. Yeah? That's why we're kind of geared that way, we're not investing a whole lot of time in people that are not really interested in walking away from the world and walking with the Lord."

[30] Raed: "25% of our fellowship has a strong conviction of mission and a pretty good understanding of what it is. 25%, so if we're, I would say 50 people meeting regularly, I would say 12 or 13, 15 of us have a grasp of what we're doing and why, and are going to continue to do it."

are more than these 15 that are actively witnessing however, according to Raed, but in his estimation they "do not see the whole picture."

The leadership would, it appears, define mission as primarily sharing the claims of Christ particularly in a relational context affirmed by an exemplary lifestyle and good works in the community. If at all possible members of the Mountain Church need to be on good terms with their families and neighbors. Raed refers to this lifestyle as modeling the gospel.[31] As members engage society, Raed believes they also need to have a settled position on the major tenets of Druze theology,[32] folk beliefs, a rejection of amulets, etc. This then allows the church to participate in the normal flow of Druze village life, with its relationships, weddings, funerals, and everyday business while retaining its distinctiveness as a religious community. They are encouraged by the leadership to participate with a pure heart and to not do anything, including rituals and celebrations,[33] out of fear. Participation in rather than withdrawal from society is critical to the missional posture that the Mountain Church has adopted.

Raed believes that witness is foundationally relational followed by an intellectual engagement as opposed to much of the historical Protestant mission practice which has been foundationally intellectual followed by the development of relationships. Consequently, Raed's goal for the families in the Mountain Church is that they remain so integrated in society that they should gain the respect of the community as their upright lifestyles are observed. His vision is that, within the patriarchal structure of the mountain villages, heads of Mountain Church households would be afforded positions of respect as elders in their clans,[34] with the Mountain Church then

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[31] Raed: "But the reason is because we have a message, we have a gospel, not just a message but a model to flesh out. So this is a constant, constant focus and it's amazing how long it takes for people to really grab ahold of it. It's not easy. But I'm so encouraged. ___ has got it, 100%. I think that our team is pretty well really, really focused on that, very focused on that."

[32] This would include responses to ideas influenced by monism, dualism, Gnosticism, and reincarnation.

[33] He gives the example of Druze weddings and funerals, which are steeped in prayers and religious ritual, as one would expect. In addition, though the Druze do not fast, he also gives the example of Ramadan for Syrian Sunni members of the community. They are seeking to answer the question of how a member of the Mountain Church can be an active member of their community.

[34] " …my relationship to God constrains me to act a certain way toward you, and my relationship, actually my relationship with you constrains me to act a certain way with other people, too. And so we want that to be the kind of driving force behind our leaders, because it makes for really good relationships with the community. You overcome intellectual barriers to the gospel, you overcome cultural barriers. This is how you overcome them. I really believe that in the last 1400 or more years, in the Middle East, no churches have been planted for this very reason. That we just wanted to, an intellectual campaign or a message campaign, which is not really relevant to this culture. What is relevant to this culture is a community or family movement that is led by game-changers, patriarchs, let me say the word. Patriarch. It's not a bad word. I know in the Western world it's really looked down upon. Patriarch is somebody that thinks he's better than his wife and he's kind of dictating to other people what to do. But actually, and even in my experience, that is not the case. The patriarch is a protector, is somebody who protects people. He hardly ever gets to tell anybody, I say gets to tell because people think that he wants to, but he hardly ever tells everybody what to do. All he does is clean up after them and protect them, and if they ask for advice he gives them guidance. And so if you've got patriarchs like this planted in the community and they are regarded by the community as patriarchs, then you've got a big achievement in sharing the gospel."

becoming "… a community or family movement that is led by game changers, patriarchs…" In his own estimation this has already happened with himself (and possibly with Rashid also) as he is very busy counseling and advising his wider family and others in the village on a wide range of varied concerns,[35] only some of them being spiritual subjects. However, Raed has some obstacles to overcome as he pursues this missional strategy. In the interview he relates some of his own struggles as he is kind and helpful to some people in his village who express gratitude for his help and appreciation of his fine character but also communicate regret that he is no longer Druze. Raed responds by saying, "I am a Druze but I believe in Jesus" and "you are my family – that's why I came back!" and goes to great lengths to explain his desire not to leave or reject the Druze community while still being true to his faith convictions. Despite this, it would appear that it is still initially difficult for people to accept that Raed is Druze. This is understandable in a context where communities are formed both around family and around religion rather than ethnic or linguistic differences. If someone were to embrace the faith convictions of another religion it is not difficult to imagine that the wider community would regard this not only as a rejection of its religion but also a leaving of that community for another. If Raed had become an atheist or declared himself agnostic that would have perhaps made his journey easier socially as it would be perceived as a rejection of the Druze belief system rather than an adoption of another community's (in this case Christian) belief system. Despite this, Raed, Rashid, and others continue to actively engage in the Druze community in all aspects of life apart from the specific religious gatherings of the *uqqal.*[36]

In fact Raed takes this concept further and describes how the Mountain Church speaks of itself as part of the tribe of Jesus. In this terminology it is assumed that the tribe of Jesus is Christianity worldwide with the Mountain Church being part of that tribe, perhaps similar to a clan. Out of this new identity their motivation for mission is framed. Raed describes mission as "the family business" with Jesus, as the head of the tribe/clan, naturally being in charge of that business. As is the custom in the Middle East, the members of the tribe/clan want to be (and indeed are expected to be) involved in the family business. It is fascinating to see how Raed portrays the tension of following the faith claims of an adopted religion while still remaining in the village of one's birth and maintaining the family and community relationships within the framework of the hierarchical loyalties that every Druze would maintain. It would be expected

[35] Raed shared in the interview that he gives marriage counseling, advice on getting visas for travel, and advice on educational matters as well as business ventures and, remarkably, even on some livestock questions.

[36] Literally "the enlightened" or those that are initiated into the secretive Druze religion. This is opposed to the *juhhal,* literally "the ignorant" or non-initiated who make up the majority of the Druze community. See Kais Firro, *A History of the Druzes* (Leiden: Brill Academic Pub., 1992), 22. The Mountain Church is made up of people from this second group. Robert Brenton Betts in his book "The Druze" says of the *juhhal* that they "protected the secrecy and sanctity of their religion through their loyalty to one another. Although not permitted access to the 6 holy books or to knowledge of the mysterious secrets of their contents, the uninitiated were not without a religion but were given a simplified outline of their faith in the form of the strict code of moral and ethical behavior." Betts, *The Druze*, 16.

for a Druze to be primarily loyal to his immediate family followed by a loyalty to his clan followed by a loyalty to the Druze people. By portraying belief in the faith claims of Christ and obedience to his teaching as something akin to joining a new tribe, then Raed is appealing to the Mountain Church's adherents' primary loyalties. Raed conveys the balancing act that the Mountain Church is performing by being part of the Druze community and being a member of the "Lord's family." Framed in this language then it is natural that when there is a conflict between following Druze societal norms and following the norms of the "tribe of Jesus" the tribe of Jesus wins. Raed illustrates this by giving the example of loving one's enemies. It can be assumed that when someone shows love and acceptance to an enemy of the community or clan (as opposed to someone with whom there is a personal enmity) the members of that clan naturally conclude that that individual is siding with the enemy and by implication betraying the community. However, as a member of the Mountain Church and as an adherent to the faith claims of Christ, then the command "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:4) must be obeyed. Ultimately the primary loyalty is to the tribe of Jesus and therefore the Mountain Church loves their enemies, even the ones that are opposed to and threaten the Druze community. Similar to the situations found in the other case studies, following the commands of Christ often make the adherents in the "Lord's family" respected members of society as they are honest in their business dealings, kind, do good works to their neighbors and family, and are faithful to their spouses. However, often this stance of love toward one's enemies, individual and societal, creates much tension with family members and neighbors and is the cause of some ostracism and persecution. How this love is expressed and communicated practically varies greatly according to time and place. Often obedience to this command creates the distinctive between followers of the faith claims of Christ and the wider society.[37]

Raed sees mission and community as "two sides of the same coin."[38] Even those that are sent out to other Druze communities go with the goal of forming communities which are similar to

[37] Interestingly enough, Raed and I were discussing a serious concern that the Mountain Church had recently had (this conversation was outside of our formal interview). The Mountain Church had sent a young couple to a region in a neighboring country to begin a new fellowship among the Druze population there. Due to the civil unrest that is in that country, the young couple soon found themselves in the middle of a very desperate situation. The village where they lived was surrounded by a radical Islamic militia famous for its brutality. Raed shared that the young husband of the church planting couple was able to be an active witness, reading Psalms to the fighters, as he took his place literally "in the trenches" alongside all the other men of the village. Raed seemingly had no problem with the young man taking up arms with the rest of the village in order to defend themselves and their families, admittedly in extreme circumstances. It would appear that their commitment to loving their enemies does not include a strong commitment to pacifism. The conflict was resolved politically, the radical militia withdrew, and the village was spared. The Mountain Church saw this as an answer to their prayers.

[38] Raed: "The mission becomes the community, I mean all of this is not a program that is being fulfilled. It's a person that's being built…the church is planted because you built this leader. So it's an expression of a person being built, not a program or an event being planned. And that's the distinction. That is, so you build community and you fulfill the mission all in one, in that one person who is full of the Holy Spirit hopefully and living out his life

the Mountain Church in the new areas where they have been sent. This is exemplified in the case of a young couple with their baby who, after being trained for a number of years by Raed and other members of the leadership team, were sent back to a neighboring country from where they originally came to establish a new community of believers. They were sent out with the blessing of the mountain church fellowship, given some financial assistance to help reestablish themselves back in their original community, and continue to maintain close communication between themselves and the Mountain Church leadership. They are regarded as still part of the Mountain Church. Investing in young leaders like these are a priority. Another case also exemplifies this model of mission, as leaders of a house group attached to the fellowship but on another mountain had, in the opinion of Raed, so many relational issues within their own immediate and extended family that they were asked to close down the house group, move to the town where the Mountain Church meets on a Sunday morning, and be situated close to where the fellowship's leadership could invest in them and coach them in developing healthy relationships.

Raed describes them in this manner:

> The Shepherd leaders…were really well-trained as far as individuals but their standing in the community was not really what they needed it to be. They were constantly struggling with financial problems. If they go back (to their previous village) they will form another group in the blink of an eye, because they are attractive, they've got solutions. But they need to get their stuff together more to form a church. They can have a group, no problem. But to go further than that I think they need to be more responsible. And I'm focusing especially on the 25-year-old (son of the Shepherd leader couple), he needs to have major decisions in his life at this point, getting married, getting a job and staying close to Christ, he has a lot of choices…

In another situation, where that kind of relational investment could not be made, that particular house group was handed over to another fellowship, unconnected organizationally to the Mountain Church, for their leadership to oversee.

Community and family are clearly a high value to Raed and the rest of the leadership team and their missional praxis reflects this. Raed communicated in the interview that they seek to focus on the mainstream of Druze society, the "heart of the community" as he terms it, rather than the fringe elements, which most often translates into engaging with entire families.[39] This is seen in one of the major efforts of the Mountain Church which has been the establishment of a private school primarily catering to the strata of the Druze community that can afford a good

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as a Christian…Our mission and community are the same, because our mission is to plant a community, transform community. So, community transformation is both our mission and our way."

[39] Raed: "And I think to reach the very heart of this society, you (have to) go with the mainstream family. And so we're not picking up people on the fringes, we want to go to the very heart of the community."

private education. Through the school, relationships have been formed with students, students' parents, and teachers and out of those relationships the claims of Christ have been regularly presented. As a result, some students have started attending the Sunday morning gatherings while Raed speaks also of marriage counseling given to the parents of some of the students. Though committed to giving a quality education, the Mountain Church is also motivated by a holistic approach to engaging the community through the school. There are a number of scholarships for poor families to attend school, though the majority of students come from well-established families in the community, completely in line with the Mountain Church's missional strategy.[40]

The overarching strategy to focus on families as a way of influencing and impacting mainstream Druze society has distinct advantages. It would most probably be perceived to be more honorable in a collectivist society than gatherings of individuals from different families and clans and would lend itself to a more cohesive faith community as family units form the foundation for the church. People attending and committing themselves to the community as a family also bring with that unit a more diverse network of relationships through which missional activity could flow. However, where this strategy leaves the individual genuinely seeking answers to his or her problems in a faith context, who is perhaps in conflict with her family, is unclear. Does this individual not receive the initial care and attention that a family unit would receive and does this mean that genuine seekers sometimes come and leave unsatisfied because they do not fit the strategic mission target profile? Certainly it is clear that there are individuals who are committed members of the Mountain Church congregation. Raed speaks of one of the requirements for baptism being that the individual being baptized must have communicated his faith commitment to his family (this could be immediate or wider family) beforehand and one of the desired objectives of this rite is to perform the ceremony in public and with family present if possible. This would appear to indicate that not all adherents attend the gatherings as family units and that somewhere in their faith journey the Mountain Church welcomed them and included them in their community. Although there is a strong intentional focus to their

[40] Raed: "But having said that, a very big influence that we're having as a church is in the school. Our teachers that are not believers are becoming very, very interested and starting, I mean I think some of them are starting to think that they are believers in their own mind. And so also some parents, we're getting some significant time with parents through the students. We have a Bible class for our students and they go home and tell their parents Jesus is God, and other things. At first 3 or 4 families would kind of try to inoculate or vaccinate their children and it shows up right away because the next day the kid will come and say, 'No, Jesus is not God.' We have learned how to handle that without ourselves saying, 'Oh, yes, he is!' We say, 'OK, let's see, let's find out.' And a month or two later we have the parent coming and saying, 'Well, we believe Jesus is God after all.' This is really wonderful. We have some marriage counseling going on with parents because through students that have problems in school we've tried to trace it back with them and it ends up being a problem at home, not necessarily in the student. As a church, we actually have some students starting to show up on Sunday. And their parents, I know they want to come but they're still kind of hesitant."

missional posture as evidenced by the effort put into engaging refugees, that focus is not rigid but allows some room for interested individuals and again reflects a commendable strength.

Summary
In the second round of interviews, Raed gave an update on the growth experienced by the Mountain Church as well on the very trying dissension and eventual split in the fellowship. The church continues its missional engagement in society, focusing on families and emphasizing a relational approach to being a witness. Raed believes that intellectual engagement comes after relationships have been firmly established. He sees mission and community as intrinsically joined and expounded on how they see their missional posture as an outflow of their self-understanding as a clan in the "tribe of Jesus."

The shape of the community continues to reflect aspects of a large extended family (or clan) and continues to be strengthened and defined by the raising up of leadership, the use of ritual (such as the Eucharist and baptism), and regular gatherings appropriate to the culture in which the Mountain Church is embedded. They wish to remain engaged in society but continue to refrain from partaking in any of the overt Druze religious practices. As many in the fellowship have suffered in one way or another for their new faith convictions, the Mountain Church continues to regard this as a normal outcome of their beliefs and something to be patiently endured. Themes around mission and community formation, common to the five fellowships, will be examined and critiqued in a later section.

The Second Mountain Church

Introduction
This follow-up interview was conducted with Rashid in the spring of 2015. It was again conducted in the semi-structured, open-ended format and went for one hour and twenty minutes. The questions asked can be found in the Appendix. The goal of the interview was to receive an update on the fellowship and to converse around the issues raised by the "Early Church Voices" chapter, particularly focusing on the themes of community and mission.

Description

- Update:

Rashid gives his understanding of what transpired during the period leading up to his leaving the Mountain Church and the possible causes for the relational split between himself and Raed. At the time of the second round of interviews, Rashid had left the Mountain Church 15 months previously. He doesn't know why he was asked to, as he claims, "leave the church,"[41] but this

[41] Rashid: "Okay, one year and 3 months ago we left (the Mountain Church) because of a misunderstanding with Raed. I don't know why he told us to leave the church - I don't know why."

left him at the time feeling frustrated and angry. Later on in the interview, as he retells the events, he mentions that he was asked to step down from leadership, which possibly means he understood that he was being asked to leave the church, as stated above. Raed, in his retelling of the events, only mentions that Rashid was asked to "step back from leadership for a period." Rashid, an adherent (and leader) of the Mountain Church for twelve years, felt that he had a close relationship with Raed for almost all that time, visiting each other in their homes and sharing meals together. Shortly before the relational split, or as Rashid terms it "misunderstanding," Raed asked Rashid to become a pastor alongside him in the church. Rashid's understanding was that the Americans behind Raed were encouraging this to happen. Rashid felt that, because of limited time and energy (Rashid is a general surgeon with his own busy practice as well as a family), he was unable to accept this position. Rashid's perception is that from the time that he refused this offer there was a change in the relationship between himself and Raed.[42] After some time Rashid was asked to step back from the leadership team of the church of which he was a part and take a sabbatical for three years. Rashid mentions that he was confused, was not given a reason as to why he was being asked to step down, and didn't really understand what a "sabbatical" even meant. It is perhaps understandable that Rashid felt that he was being asked to leave the church. Rashid and his family did leave and began to meet by themselves as a family on Sundays. They were contacted by several of the families who regularly attend the Mountain Church, asking why he was no longer a part of the mountain fellowship. They stated that if Rashid and his family did not attend the Mountain Church, they would not either. Out of a pastoral concern for those families, Rashid invited them to attend a meeting in his home. He stated that it was never his intention to start a church but out of concern for the families he went ahead and began a meeting in his home.[43]

Those people began to gather on Sundays and even though they do not call the meeting a church, but rather a prayer/teaching group, it very quickly took on the community life and functions that one would normally associate with a church. It grew to around 30 or 35 adherents with new people, interested, according to Rashid, in hearing about the teachings of

[42] Rashid: "I think there was a time when we were very close to each other, you know. And I spent wonderful days in his home and he asked me to be pastor in the church. The Americans (perhaps Raed's board or mission agency – this is unclear from the interview) asked him to raise up a co-pastor in the church - much better to be two. I told him I have no time and am very tired. I'm afraid of making a commitment that I can't keep."

[43] Rashid: "All the members there…love me, I'm very close to them, I teach them, I work with them, it's a group of 12 years. It's not one year! I have 12 years there. All of them, they came there and I *worked* with them. And they asked where is (Rashid)? Some of them, they know that I will not go anymore to the church. They came to me and they told me…if I am not going there, they don't want to go to the church anymore. I prayed and I told them, I'm very afraid but I don't want to lose them. I told them if you want, every Sunday we have a meeting of our family and you can come with us. The first week one family came, the second week two families, three families. And then we started to be here, not only from (another mountain district), some people from here. And the church, I don't call it church, I call it a group, meeting to pray and to teach. After that we grew and now we are 30, 35." Interviewer: "Are there new people that are from the villages?" Rashid: "Yes." Interviewer: "And are they all Druze?" Rashid: "Yes, all Druze."

Christ, coming from the surrounding villages. It would appear that Rashid does most of the teaching, others helping out occasionally, and they now rotate the meeting between four houses, each week in a different house. This seems to be to relieve the burden on the host/hostess rather than for security concerns. The services are simple in format: twenty minutes for singing, twenty minutes for prayer, and again the same allotted time for teaching.[44]

- The shape of community:

The fellowship is almost entirely made up of men, women, and children of Druze background.[45] From the interview it became clear that the term "Druze" is a collective identity relating to where they were raised and to what family/clan they belong.[46] Like the mountain fellowship from which they came, they do not participate in any of the Druze religious rituals other than what is normally expected (weddings and funerals) for a member of that community.[47] They still regard themselves as part of the wider Druze community and are regarded by that community as Druze who believe in Jesus.[48] They avoid terms like “Christian” or “evangelical” and would identify themselves publicly as "followers of the Messiah."[49] Among themselves, however, they regard themselves as part of the wider Christian faith, celebrating Easter and Christmas (with their Christian content) and so further maintaining some identification with the Christian community.[50] This could be evidence of the liminal state of “hybridity” in which they may be operating.[51] They see themselves as people who have found the one true God through the word

[44] Rashid: “Our meeting is as in a church. First of all, we sing for 20 minutes, we have (time) worshipping God, and (then) 20 minutes for prayers. And 20 minutes for the teaching.”

[45] Rashid: "We are Druze, all Druze, we want to (plant) a church from the Druze."

[46] For instance, they speak of having nothing to do with the Druze religion but then talk of being "Druze." Clearly the term "Druze" has a broader meaning than just religion. Rashid: "We’re believers in Jesus...Druze in name, not believers in the religion, we’re Druze, it’s on my ID card. We didn’t change our ID cards."

[47] Regarding Druze religious feasts, Rashid stated, "We started to avoid all the religious feasts.” In the context of discussing the possibility of creating new rituals for weddings and even funerals, the interviewer asked: “But you would go to a funeral (in the village)?" To which Rashid replied, “We have to."

[48] Rashid: “And what impresses us is that society accepted us as a Druze group. Even the sheiks sometimes (have) told us that they believe in Jesus - the Druze they believe in Jesus! And we want to tell them that they must know the real Jesus from the Bible. Until now they refuse to accept that idea but they (do) accept that Jesus is ours.”

[49] Rashid: “Yes, they know that we believe in Jesus....We are avoiding telling them that we are Christian or evangelical or Baptist. But they know that we believe in Jesus.” Interviewer: “But when they talk about themselves with their neighbors, do they say they are Druze who love Jesus, or ‘we’ve become believers in Jesus’?” Rashid: “Believers in the Messiah.” Interviewer: “They don’t say they’re Christians?” Rashid: “It’s hard. (The Druze know Christians). If we identify ourselves as Christians, then we will be cast out from our society. We’ve made this decision that we are believers in Christ. We say that we are Christians (but not to the society around us). That’s rejected.”

[50] Rashid: "Christmas and Easter...we believe that these are our celebrations."

[51] it did appear throughout the interview that Rashid was switching between two identities. On occasion he referred to himself as a Druze and then on other occasions he referred to himself as a Christian. This may also be true of the congregation, identifying themselves as Druze to the wider society but among themselves would sometimes refer to themselves as Christian or as evangelical. This may be a reflection of what Jens Bartlett terms “hybridity.” He believes that this is where a convert continues to identify with his culture (religion) of birth while also identifying with some form of Christianity. See Barnett, “Living A Pun,” Kindle edition, chapter 4.

of God.[52] There are on occasion some people from traditional Christian or Muslim backgrounds that attend the fellowship and even though the majority of attendees are Druze, Rashid sees the church as a "church for Jesus," not just for Druze.[53]

There are some defining practices that the community has established to create a distinction between them and Druze society. Apart from the Sunday morning gatherings for study and worship and the celebration of Easter and Christmas, the fellowship does use some insider/outsider language (such as "followers of the Messiah") that reinforces their sense of being apart somewhat from surrounding society. They have begun to discuss the possibility of developing their own marriage ceremony and are even beginning to contemplate separate funeral services.[54] The strong sentiment that they do not wish to be buried in a Druze graveyard with a Druze religious ceremony performed by Druze religious leaders is an aspiration that at present could not be realized without the members officially changing their religion. It does reflect, however, their opinion regarding the Druze religion. Baptism and the Eucharist are practiced but it would not appear that these are rituals that would clearly indicate who is "in" the fellowship and who is "out" of the fellowship. Baptism is for those who request it and is possibly seen as a further step in the life of a believer rather than as a way to enter the fellowship.[55] Likewise the Eucharist, which they celebrate monthly, is served to all the regular attendees. The ceremony is explained and visitors are encouraged to either refrain from sharing in the ceremony or to "think of Jesus"[56] while they do. Moving from being a visitor to being a

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[52] Interviewer: “The people that come (to the church), would they see themselves as evangelical?” Rashid: “Yes, they know that they are evangelical. They see themselves as (those who) know the true God. There was something they felt but now they know. They were searching, now they found where the truth is. They have found the source - it is the word of God.”

[53] Rashid: “In our meeting we are 90% Druze. We have a few Christians or Muslims who come (also)…we are a church for Jesus.”

[54] In the confessional political system the Druze must have a Druze religious ceremony for a marriage to be officially recognized. The ceremony performed by this Mountain Church would be in addition to the Druze religious ceremony. Funerals also have this stipulation. Rashid says: “We have two (people) who want to be married. I don’t know how to…something new for us in the church. Because for their families we want to do a wedding, we want to do something in a church. As a Christian. Our church wants to do (a wedding ceremony), as a Christian wedding and (do one) for the society as they want it. Can’t refuse to (do what the Druze society wants), can’t refuse the (Druze) society. I told (my wife) I want to be buried as a Christian, not as a Druze. Our church asked me how (are we going to do this), we haven’t a solution but we’re going to do it. Some of them asked me to (establish a graveyard) for us but I tell them it’s (too) early to discuss this problem. Because we want to wait.”

[55] Rashid: “First of all, we started with them, little bit (by) little bit. (Telling) them about Jesus. Now they are believers, really believers, and some of them want to be baptized.”

[56] Rashid: “Sometimes some people come with us, they believe in Jesus but I don’t know how much they are believing. They feel if they (don't partake in communion), something is wrong, this is our society. I told them, it’s better not to take. But if you take it, it’s not that this bread saves you to take it. You can remember Jesus Christ, take it and remember that Jesus Christ did something for you. I didn’t tell them that you will die if you take it. I don’t know, if it’s something not very good to take it. I told them if you didn’t believe yet, don’t be ashamed but when you take it please remember Jesus. Jesus took my sins on the cross, he broke his body and his blood covered me from the sin. Remember this, if you are not yet committed in your life, you can take it but do this, remember

part of the group begins with a clear confession of faith and trust in the person, work, and teachings of Christ. From there the process appears to be more intuitive. People attend the meetings more consistently, participate in the singing and prayers, and are actively speaking about Christ and his teachings to family members, neighbors, etc. Rashid also observes that, after time, the new adherents begin to see themselves as part of the family and act accordingly by helping out others in the church, listening to their problems, and generally being involved in each other's lives.[57]

Rashid describes the fellowship as a family in which true concern for each other's welfare is expressed through phone calls, visits, etc., outside of the Sunday morning meetings. Time is spent, even in the public gatherings, on deepening those relationships,[58] and offerings are taken for the poor families of the church. Rashid sees that fellowship is closing the accepted social distance between those with wealth, education, and connections and the rest by holding to a strong sense of equality before God. God, says Rashid, can speak through anyone to the rest of the group[59] and states, in contrast to the Mountain Church, that he is not opposed to women as teachers or leaders. Rashid has indicated in the interviews that he seeks to empower women.[60]

Jesus Christ. Because some of them take it, I don't want them to feel like they're under judgment. I don't know if it's correct but this is my way."

[57] Rashid: "Now we have a group that comes regularly, every Sunday. And at the beginning they started (slowly) and then they (became) active in the church. They want to do a lot of things – sing, pray, witness, they share with others." Interviewer: "Are you saying that they become part of the group by becoming active?" Rashid: "No, no, by (believing) they believe. First of all, we started with them - little bit (by) little bit. (Telling) them about Jesus. Now they are believers, real believers, and some of them want to be baptized. (At first) they wanted to know more about Jesus, but now they are part of the group, we see them (as) not (being any) different from us. This makes us have confidence in them. They accepted Jesus in their life. We prayed with them, all of them, we prayed with them, and they accepted Jesus and they're believers. Not as (hearers) only, as believers, and they are working…and this is (what they are) feeling. They feel that they are a part of our family - it's really family, we help each other. If anybody has a problem, we talk with them (on the) phone - we help each other."

[58] Rashid: "(Just) 3 weeks ago we prayed together and we declared our love one to another. Everybody, 25 or 30, (went to everybody else) to pray with (each other) and (ask them if) there was any problem and to be forgiven and then to declare (their) love."

[59] Rashid: "I told them that we are - this is I took it from the Bible - that it's not important what you think that you are. I'm a doctor, another one is a carpenter, another one is a tiler. But we don't know in the body of the Christ (what role we have). We must know that we are all one in the church. There are no levels – I am the pastor, but we are all the same in the body of Christ. We don't know (what role we have) in the body of Christ. Jesus can talk to anyone of us, not only to me."

[60] Rashid: "We are one in the body of the Christ. But Paul has asked that in the church or in the home (that) the man is the head and the woman is the church. In our church (a) woman has a role…she's a member of the body of the Christ and we respect that." Interviewer: "But a woman would not be a pastor, or a head of a church?" Rashid: "We're not against a woman being the head. We're not contradicting Paul but sometimes the woman can give (a lot) in church. And in our church we want women to be leaders." Interviewer: "So they can teach, they pray, all of that?" Rashid: "Yes."

This church has developed a clear leadership structure. Rashid, after starting the group and leading it by default, was asked by the congregation (voted by the majority) to officially take on the leadership. Though at first reluctant because of time pressure, Rashid assumed the role as a long-term commitment and began by choosing two others to form a leadership team with him. Rashid explains that this process was not official, meaning he hasn't announced this in a group setting, but nonetheless has received some affirmation in his choice from others in the group. As he continues this process of expanding the leadership structure, he admits to wondering if his approach is the wisest. He has chosen two people who were with him from the beginning of the church, who have a commitment to the group, to witnessing to the community, and who have suffered for their commitment to the teachings of Christ. He refers to them as established, "good believers" but immature, lacking knowledge, which is the main cause for some of his uncertainty.[61] However, he sees them as a great help, particularly in fulfilling the mission of the church,[62] and he hopes to develop them more in the future. They also help with teaching on occasion.[63]

It is clear that Rashid is the dominant leader of this small fellowship. He is the main provider of finances for the fellowship's gatherings, though he hopes that this burden will be shared in the future.[64] He does the bulk of the teaching and leading. He believes that the main source of his authority is based on the position the congregation has asked him to fill, that is, as spiritual leader, and on the relationships he has with the different members of the congregation. They respect him and his authority. As a leader he uses the Bible as a source of authority to bring correction.[65]

[61] Rashid: "I chose them; I don't know if it's wise, because they are the beginners, they began with me. They came and they started this church (with me). They say that we want to start a church, we want to go tell the others about Jesus. They are not particularly...mature, not (knowledgeable). But they are good believers." Interviewer: "What do you mean by a good believer?" Rashid: "Their hearts (are focused on) Jesus. They can suffer, they can do anything in the name of Jesus. They are established."

[62] Rashid: "Leadership - they help me, yes, they help me. They evangelize, they bring people, and their hearts are with God. In evangelism, in the church and with others - very active."

[63] Rashid: "I preach and I give (the opportunity) sometimes for (the other) 2 persons (on the leadership team)...if they have something to preach, they can preach it."

[64] Rashid: "I do the celebration and (financial assistance for) others from our family. It's not good to say it, but…when we (grow numerically) we need to (have others involved)."

[65] Interviewer: "Why do they listen to you?" Rashid: "(Out of) respect, because it's spiritual. They ask me to be the leader and I am. I have no authority over them (in) life. Our authority is in the church as a spiritual authority. (Someone would) see me as his leader and if I talk to him he listens to me. I tell him what the Bible says and ask him to respect the word, the word of Jesus."

- Patterns of mission:

The new mountain group has a passion, fueled by prayer,[66] to share about Christ with their relatives, friends, and neighbors, similar to the mother church from which they left. Rashid stated, "We're Druze, all Druze, we want to do a church from the Druze," reflecting their sense of identity as insiders and their primary missional calling. More than half of the congregation,[67] according to Rashid, would embrace this vision. He does go on to say, however, that "Jesus is not a Druze Jesus" and that they do have a burden for people from other religious backgrounds also, particularly Muslims.[68] Interestingly, Rashid speaks of the significant role that women have in the area of witness and mission, especially to families.[69] Their verbal witness to society is rooted in an exemplary lifestyle embracing humility, servanthood, empathy, love, honesty, etc.[70] These values are not all necessarily countercultural, and in fact many would seem to be ideals in Druze society, but rather are a demonstration of the radical claim that Christ has the power to free a follower to live a virtuous life. As Rashid states, "If Jesus didn't change your life, what do you have to show for it?" The areas of humility, servanthood, and equality do contrast particularly with Druze religious institutions.

Rashid's Mountain Church does see suffering as a likely consequence not only of their faith convictions but also of their strong commitment to propagating this message. In the interview Rashid estimated that at least half of the congregation have suffered or expect to suffer for following the teachings of Christ.[71]

Summary

Rashid gave a description of this new fellowship, saying that it was formed out of a conflict with the original Mountain Church. Situated on another mountain, with all Druze adherents, the new

[66] Rashid: "I am surprised about their faith. They are praying from all their heart about the church, about Jesus, about community, about (telling) others to come to know about Jesus."

[67] Rashid: "A lot of them, more than half of them, have to be missionaries, you know. They are really believers and they give their heart to Christ and they are missionaries in our society."

[68] Rashid: "We have Syrians, we talk to them about Jesus, they are Muslim and we (tell) them it is not that we are Druze and (are) only with Druze, no, no, Jesus is for all of us. And anywhere with anybody, Druze, Christian, Sunni, Shiite, we must tell them about Jesus."

[69] Rashid: "In our society, women, I saw that in our church, women have a role, (an) important role, in telling others about Jesus. And so her family comes (to Christ) through a woman."

[70] Rashid: "You know, it's about the lifestyle. To live as the Bible says…to be honest, to love people, to help, to show others (the reality of) Jesus in your life. If Jesus didn't change your life, what do you have to show others? You must show them. I think we must change in our life to show others Jesus in our life. And then if we tell them about Jesus they know they can believe that Jesus changes (people)."

[71] Rashid: "A large number of them are ready to suffer for Christ. Half of them, I think, are ready to suffer for Jesus." Interviewer: "Have some suffered?" Rashid: "Some suffered, yes. In their families, they are suffering, because our families refuse to be Christian or to believe in Jesus. And this is heavy. Every one of us suffers a lot. But I think that (doing) mission (will cause) more suffering for us." Interviewer: "So you think there will be more suffering in the future?" Rashid: "Yes. Suffering because of (doing mission), because I see in one year we will have a big number…if we become a hundred it will become a revolution. And we must be ready for conflict."

mountain fellowship sees itself still as Druze, but Druze who are "followers of the Messiah." They are deeply committed to relationships both inside and outside of the fellowship and share a common missional vision to reach their society. When this missional engagement results in suffering of some form, they accept this as part of the normal faith journey. Rashid, though clearly the leader, is seeking to raise up other leaders from within the fellowship. Although Rashid's church has split from the Mountain Church, the two groups are almost identical in their patterns of mission and their community shape.

The City Church Community

Introduction

The following is a summary of two interviews conducted with Boutros and Noor in April 2015. The interview with Boutros lasted around an hour while Noor's interview lasted approximately an hour and a half. Boutros, as was mentioned in the first round of interviews, is the leader of an inner-city ministry center that many attendees regard as their church. Noor is the leader of a Kurdish (Kurmanji-speaking) congregation that was birthed out of the center during the period of the two rounds of interviews. He had been attending an evangelical church for a number of years before starting the Kurdish fellowship. This section seeks to describe what has transpired in the center since the first round of interviews, what is the shape of the community, and what is their pattern of mission. The center and the Kurdish fellowship, though intrinsically linked (Noor still relates to Boutros as his leader), are examined separately as an accurate reflection of their community distinctives.

Description

- Update:

As previously mentioned, the City Church has an interesting and somewhat convoluted relationship with an outreach center in a poor inner-city area of a major Middle Eastern city. Despite the leader's insistence that the center is not a church but rather a halfway house for people from Islam to gather and be discipled before being integrated into local evangelical churches, a spiritual community has nonetheless been formed with many regular adherents. A Kurdish language congregation has also been birthed, one which meets in the center's facilities, and will be examined in more detail later in this chapter.

Four years ago the center hosted a small gathering of around 100 people from the mainly Sunni Kurdish community who would meet regularly for prayer, worship, teaching, and mutual encouragement. A distinction between the center and a local evangelical church was the absence of either a Eucharistic or baptismal ceremony. The leaders, almost exclusively from

Christian background, focused on discipling the attendees. The center has now grown to around 18 main meetings a week, and they have expanded the main meeting room to seat 300-350 people which they appear to fill regularly,[72] with "over 400 individual public proclamations of faith in 2014."[73] The center has stopped doing the street evangelism ministry mentioned in the first interview and now focuses on discipling those who are coming to the center.[74]

The house groups that were in strong relationship with the center but met separately in homes (as mentioned in the first section) have now moved their primary relationship to a local evangelical church. Although some people from the groups (including the leader) do frequent the center, Boutros no longer sees those groups as being officially connected to the center. This appears to have been an amicable transference of pastoral oversight. There are now new house groups that have formed and are under the guidance of the center's leadership. Boutros, however, does sees the center also as a nursery for new churches and cites the new Kurdish language fellowship as a good example. In consequence, an interview was also conducted with Noor, the leader of the Kurdish fellowship. This study will provide a description of the patterns of mission and the shape of the community for both the center and the new Kurdish fellowship, particularly where there are distinct differences.

- The shape of community (the center):

The center serves as a public gathering place for interested people in the area, with no restrictions on who may attend. In this sense it functions similarly to a village community center or even a village mosque where people come and go as they please. They have multiple weekly activities (27) in the center with the main meetings being held in Arabic – the official language of the country where the center is situated. There are a large number of people attending from

[72] Boutros: "In 2012 we had started out the center in the fall, I mean we had taken over the center in the fall. And we had about six weekly meetings at the time, about 50 to 60 people coming to the two major meetings. And since then it's surged. It just kept on surging as the crisis in ___ heated up more and more. It surged up to 12-15-18 meetings, now we have about 18 main meetings, 27 total activities going on at the center every week. Since then we've knocked down walls in our meeting hall so that we can fit 100 chairs inside. We knocked down the outer walls of it so that we can have overflow seating of 200, so we now have 300 or 350 capacity. So people are coming. Especially in the summers, people are really coming and it's just been more and more people pressure. More and more people."

[73] Boutros: "…In 2014 the amount of people that were individually proclaiming Christ was just through the roof for us – we've never seen anything like it. People who were proclaiming faith in Christ for the first time, people who were accepting Christ, were just going through the roof. It just seemed like every day or two, two or three people were coming to Christ. We had over 400 individual proclamations of faith in 2014. Between September and December we have 165 names of people who individually gave their lives to Christ. We're getting more resolution on the actual data as we started doing data sheets, as every month everybody on staff fills out exactly what happened, who got healed, who got saved, who is being followed up on with discipleship groups. But it's just been scaling up and up and up."

[74] Boutros: "We pulled back from the streets – back in 2012 we were doing a lot of street evangelism. We actually pulled back from the streets just to do discipleship because more and more people were coming to Christ."

multiple ethnicities with the largest ethnic group being Kurds.[75] The worship services that are held there are structured almost identically to an evangelical service in other parts of the city with a typical content of prayer, teaching/preaching, singing, and fellowship.[76]

Boutros shared his belief in the importance of public space. The center has a large courtyard with a number of side rooms which people use to informally gather,[77] seeming to afford the different ethnic communities a public and, by implication, a safe place to spend time together. He sees this "hanging out" time as a great influence in rebuilding community, particularly for those from societies fractured by civil unrest. It also has the advantage of allowing women and children to mix publicly both with each other and also with men (albeit within the strict social mores of their respective people group). He sees this dynamic as somewhat akin to the role that the Middle Eastern coffee houses play (though coffee houses are not inclusive of women and children[78]) or even the function that the Jerusalem temple performed in the first days of the early church movement.[79] Boutros reports that much time is spent socializing at the center, which he considers a positive for the reasons mentioned above.

The leadership of the center still holds to a vision of the center as being a halfway house for seekers and Christ-followers from a Muslim faith and/or Muslim cultural background. "We are part of the church but not a local church," says Boutros. Despite this vision a significant proportion of the center attendees do not attend a church but rather participate in the corporate worship of Christ exclusively at the center. There is a strong emphasis on Bible study, worship, fellowship, and on modifying behavior in line with the biblical teaching given at the center. All of these elements would naturally also be found at a church. To create a distinction between the center and the local evangelical churches the leadership is insistent on not administering the sacraments of communion and baptism. However, it is clear that a spiritual community is being formed despite the leadership's desire to not be seen as an institutional church.

Attendees begin to see themselves as part of the community through being regularly present at the center. Boutros states that "there is no rite of passage" but that often people will have a

[75] The mother tongue of this group is one of the Kurdish dialects but the majority of the attendees are able to speak and read Arabic.
[76] For the rationale behind replicating the worship styles of local evangelical churches, see section Muslim Voices in Context I, The City Church Community.
[77] Personal observation by the author.
[78] Personal observation by the author.
[79] Boutros: "We do a lot of the fellowship among the believers that the early church was doing, so how they were daily meeting and reading the Bible together and fellowshipping in the homes and temple courts, that's what we're doing. So I mean the temple courts maybe would be more like the corporate worship that's going on at the center and at different churches."

sense of belonging before they come to accept the faith claims of Christ. They regularly attend often because family and friends also attend and so like to "hang out," as Boutros describes it. There also appears to be some interest in Christ and his claims. Boutros, in further clarifying the dynamics of community at the center, sees two levels of community operating simultaneously. Referring to Hiebert's adaptation of set theory to reflect on the conversion process, Boutros differentiates between the "centered set" of the center where everyone is welcome and all activities are oriented toward Christ and the "bounded set" of those that make a public profession of Christ and a belief in his person and teachings.[80] He sees this second group as being more likely to regard themselves (and to be regarded so by the leadership) as "in."

He states:

> About the gospel, we're a bounded set. About our ministry, we're a centered set…we're not judging who's in and who's out of the community, but we're just, we just want people to be moving toward loving Jesus more. For us, we do feel like there is like, not that we always know who's saved and not, but there is a line that God knows about salvation, that's like you give your life to Christ and you cross that line. So when people give their lives to Christ, we think that they have crossed that line. We don't know whether they have, because God only sees that part. But that's a bounded set. But for our ministry we have a centered set, which is just the location of that place and whoever's around there, is around there.

Those that are in the "bounded set" are more likely to be committed also to a local evangelical church, the Kurdish language fellowship, or one of the home groups attached to the center.

The center has its own leadership that is essentially paid staff from the traditional Christian community. However, they are raising up leaders from among the attendees as well (some of whom are paid), which could also be a contributing factor to community formation. As one would expect, good character is a critical requirement for those who are raised up as leaders[81] but the initial step, according to Boutros, is observing those who are mature and who take initiative, particularly in serving.[82] When asked how the raising up of leaders helps in community formation, Boutros stated:

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[80] See Paul G. Hiebert, "Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories," *Gospel in Context* 1, no. 4 (1978), 24-29.

[81] Boutros: "…the character is the key for appointing leaders. So when I appoint, and when I do put somebody responsible over somebody, they have to be a mature believer. They have to be, you know, in the biblical, I would say they would be compatible with what you call a deacon. So that kind of character, I would not feel comfortable giving a leadership role to somebody that doesn't have those things."

[82] Boutros: "We encourage leadership by initiative. As we see maturity, as we see gifts, we try to encourage those gifts in small ways. Instead of saying, 'You are now going to be responsible for this,' we just say, 'hey, could you help me out with this?' So that's how we raise up leaders."

> Because communities gather around people that lead. I mean leaders have people that come around them. And so you can't gather people without people who are worth gathering around.

Boutros also sees the center as playing a role in bringing unity among the different ethnic groups who frequent the place. Again it appears that the concept of public space available to everyone, particularly to those who are refugees or immigrants from other countries, helps to foster this. He observes:

> …we're seeing inside the center, we're seeing people that…are from groups that are at odds, we're seeing them together. We're seeing people that were Alawites, people that were Sunnis, and people that were Shiites, and people that were Kurds, Arabs, Armenians, all together, brothers greeting each other and things like that.[83] So I think that it's very present in who we are.

However, he does also relate a previous attempt to bring different ethnic groups from one country together as a congregation. This attempt ultimately failed. Boutros attributes this failure to issues with leadership and place. Women and children also seem to have a wider role at the center in comparison to their role in the community. Women share openly in the meetings, lead in prayers, and some also teach from the Christian Scriptures. Children on occasion share Bible verses up front in the meetings. New values of ethnic unity and freer roles for women, which are espoused as biblical values in the center, are being embraced by those attending.

The attendees at the center, according to Boutros, are leaving Islam for a new faith expression. Certainly this would appear to be true of those who have made a public profession of belief in the faith claims of Christ. He does not believe that many of those adherents were particularly strict observers of Islamic practice before coming into contact with the center and its gospel proclamation. No Islamic forms are practiced in the center. Boutros states in the interview that he has had no need to instruct the new adherents to reject Islam but rather this was understood by those who were making those public professions.[84] He explains further:

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[83] Greeting in the Middle East, particularly among Muslims, is almost certainly perceived as a public sign of acceptance. It is usually a handshake accompanied by multiple kisses on the cheeks – males to males and females to females. It also involves some expression of peace. I have personally observed that it is acceptable to not greet others in a public place, and different groups in enmity would not normally greet each other, as that would imply acceptance and an expression of peace.

[84] Boutros: "For us, I mean like, to be honest a lot of the Kurds they don't even do a lot of the Islamic practices. They don't pray, they don't even fast Ramadan, they might pretend. So but some of those religious practices we don't even have to teach not to do them. But they don't do them. And the ones that would do them, that have done them because there are some of them that were religious Muslims, they automatically stop doing them."

> I feel like they understand that they're not going to, like they don't want to go to the mosque because what they learned in the mosque is contrary to what they've learned in the gospel. So all of that stuff, I think it's understood that it's a package deal for them. Like Islam you can't pick and choose one of the principles…these are the questions that Westerners, Western missiologists ask, and I've never encountered somebody asking…. shall I continue fasting but not pray 5 times a day? Should I continue bowing down while I pray? It's a package deal, like this is "Islam brand." So we see that these things stop…so all of those Islamic forms…we don't do those. And I never had to teach that.

Although those who have made a profession of faith do not often use the term "Christian" to describe themselves, they do see themselves as having joined the wider Christian community. They prefer to call themselves "followers of Jesus" but according to Boutros have assumed a Christian identity.[85] When asked how others in the community regard those who are the core group of the center, Boutros related a story of a devout Muslim woman who asked of her friends, "Can you believe all these Kurds are becoming Christians?"[86] He sees this as indicative of how he suspects the wider Muslim community would describe those at the center, particularly the regular adherents (i.e. "the bounded set").

It would appear that the core group at the center have embraced suffering as a normal part of life's journey. Boutros explains:

> I think when people cross that threshold, to actually become a believer, to give their life to Christ, they understand that suffering is going to happen. We remind people of that but they say look we know…we teach that Jesus is worth that. And that you're gaining something of eternal value. But there's a lot of people that have lost everything anyway, but people have told us, several people have told us, I lost my business or I lost my home in ___ but I still feel like God allowed this war to happen so that we could come and learn about Christ. And I would never say that to somebody, but they are saying that.

- The shape of community (the Kurdish fellowship):

[85] Boutros: "Yeah, it is part of the DNA of the group, and it's also because we have a Christian identity. So all of the believers they think that they're Christians…but often the way they say it is more like…we follow Jesus, we believe in Jesus. But their understanding of that is like a synecdoche, I think that's what you call it? It's like there's a reference and so the word that you're using means this reference. So the word that they're using they would say like we're believers in Jesus, the reference is that they're Christians. So they're not like saying we're believers in Jesus, we're Muslims."

[86] Boutros: "One time somebody told me that he was in the home of one of his relatives and there was a Kurdish Muslim woman that was very conservative. And she was saying 'Can you believe all these Kurds that are becoming Christians? They're not shy to do this!' So they are looked at as, so that was just an indicator, I just realized I had an example of an outsider's perspective on what these people are doing. So they look at it as they are becoming Christian."

The Kurdish fellowship began as a Bible study that met at the center and was conducted in one of the Kurdish dialects. It grew to around 20 regular adherents and began to see itself as a separate congregation within the community that was formed in the center. Noor, who leads the fellowship, is a paid staff member of the organization that funds the center. The center's leadership encouraged Noor to begin the fellowship on the premises of the center. After a period of time they also were joined by a Kurdish language house group that had decided to amalgamate with them in the center.

From Noor's description it would appear that the Kurdish fellowship replicates in their worship what is usually practiced in other worship services held at the center, albeit in Kurdish. As one would expect, singing, prayer, teaching, and fellowship are all common elements. A weekly offering is also gathered and used every three months to meet various needs or to have a communal meal. Noor reports that the group does focus on creating community, which he believes is particularly crucial for people from his own country due to the inter-ethnic struggles there. They spend a lot of time together, often visiting each other in their homes (as opposed to just "hanging out" at the center like other attendees). Like the center they do not as of yet practice the sacraments of communion and baptism. Noor states that they haven't as yet baptized anyone as a church though it appears they are not opposed to this. The same could also be said in regard to the Eucharist. They have not yet broken bread as a fellowship (though individuals do break bread with other churches) but intend to do so in the future. Like the center, the Kurdish fellowship seeks to empower women into leading and teaching roles despite the male-dominant value in Kurdish culture.[87]

Unlike the center, Noor sees the fellowship as a church similar to the established evangelical churches in the city. Even though Noor is not an ordained pastor (a distinction he made himself in the interviews), he regards the fellowship functioning in most other areas (fellowship, ministries, etc.) as comparable to other churches that he has observed.[88] Boutros shared his vision of the center being a "nursery of congregations" and it would appear that, although Noor is funded by the center, the Kurdish fellowship has been given freedom to develop along the lines that they desire.

In the interview it became increasingly clear that identity is a significant issue for both the Kurds as a people and for Noor personally. I found this portion of the interview particularly compelling

[87] Noor: "We in the Kurdish society, the women live in a male-dominated society, and that tradition is still around, so because of that we were saying, one of these days (in the near future) in the Kurdish meeting, the leadership of the worship, leading the prayers and even the sermon should be given by a woman."
[88] Noor: "If you compare our works with the works of other churches, then yes, we are a church. We do the same things. They haven't called me a pastor - I'm just a leader - but all the activities we do is like a church. Our relationships, lives, and activities function like a church."

and in consequence, rather than summarizing his words, I have quoted Noor more extensively than usual:

> …as a community we've been rejected. The Kurds have always felt like they are foreigners in the country they are living in. There are first and second-class citizens, but we are third-class. We don't have anything called a country or an identity. Even on my ID, it says "Arab." But I am not Arab. If it could say "Kurdish," I would be so happy. I feel pressure to belong.[89]

Certainly for Noor this struggle for identity also led to his spiritual journey. He continues:

> As a Kurd, I left the Muslim religion because I never found my identity with them. I am separated from my land, my rights, the most simple things we need as humans. If I enter another faith and don't feel like I belong, it will be better to live (as a worldly person). For Kurds, they always say, "We need to be Kurds before anything else, like religion."

It would appear then that this emotional and psychological need has been transferred to a strong emphasis in their teaching.

> So when I saw Abraham and how the gospel started from Armenia - the Greater Kurdistan - I feel like that speaks to me. Abraham goes to Korish, which is historically one of the Kurdish tribes. So I've been included in the Bible. And when Abraham went to Ur…I see myself there, too. In major historical facts, I feel included. Maybe the Medes mentioned in Acts…Kurds always say there is a connection between the Medes and us.[90] They believed in Jesus. So I'm even included in the New Testament, in the first church. I'm not mentioned in the Qur'an. So if I'm looking for my identity, I can identify with the Bible.

This teaching also extends to finding hope in the afterlife. Noor explains:

> That's why we are shifting people's perceptions from this earthly belonging. God opened my eyes to think, "Even if I got 100 Kurdish identities, but not a heavenly identity, it's all for nothing." So this pressure we feel to belong, to find our roots, our value, part of this world, God took (that pressure) from me. He told me there is a heavenly belonging I can have.

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[89] King affirms this mistreatment by ethnic majorities. See Diane E. King, *Kurdistan on the Global Stage: Kinship, Land, and Community in Iraq* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 5.

[90] There are many competing theories regarding the origin of the Kurds. For a brief overview of this debate, see Michael Eppel, *A People Without a State: The Kurds from the Rise of Islam to the Dawn of Nationalism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 1-8.

When asked how the adherents of the Kurdish fellowship would describe themselves (e.g. Christian, Muslim who follows Jesus, etc.) he answered, "When a Kurd is asked, are you Kurdish or Muslim, they say Kurdish. So we say we don't have any relation to Islam. We don't care about Islam." It clearly shows that their self-understanding is primarily that they are Kurdish first and remain so no matter what religious beliefs they hold. With such a strong identity connected to their ethnic roots, it is clear that even while rejecting Islamic beliefs, forms, terminology, etc., and replacing them with Christian beliefs, forms, etc., they are able to create community without losing their primary identity as Kurds.[91] This embracing of evangelical Christianity is not without a reaction from the wider Kurdish community, as will be noted later.

Another aspect of the Kurdish fellowship that would lend shape to that community is the appointing and developing of leaders. There is a group of five men (including Noor) that has taken responsibility for the church and this group in turn is grooming others for leadership also. Noor states that they look for people who are faithful. By this they mean people who already seem to assume responsibility for the ongoing activities of the fellowship without needing a position or having to be told by the established leader what needs to be done. These are people also that are paying their tithes and demonstrate a commitment to the church itself, to the ministries of the church, to prayer, and to fellowship. The leaders that have been appointed share the load of disciple-making, evangelism, and of general attention to the adherents and ministries of the fellowship. These new leaders are an example to the rest of the fellowship in love, both to those in the church and to those outside.

Noor states:

> When they love each other well and get along, some people are jealous, in a good way. People see them and say, "I want to be like that." They are good ambassadors of Jesus. They laugh, cry, go out together. This allows the greater community to see we all love each other well and aren't working for our own personal gain. They want to be a part of our team.

Their authority with those in the fellowship flows from this godly lifestyle and loving commitment to the attendees.

Another distinction of the Kurdish church is in its attitude toward suffering. They regard it as a normal part of life and in particular a common result of following the teachings of Christ. It would appear that many in the fellowship have suffered in one form or another. Some of those

[91] For an interesting parallel among Kyrgyz Muslims converting to Christianity, addressing similar issues, see David Radford, *Religious Identity and Social Change: Explaining Christian Conversion in a Muslim World*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), Chapt. 9, "Religious Conversion and the Reconstruction of Ethnic Identity."

who suffer are unable to attend the fellowship for various reasons but are still kept in fellowship by home visits from the church. They are, on occasion, helped materially also. In the interview, Noor shared his own experience of suffering. Being cast out from family and friends for his faith convictions, he actually travelled to another country in the Middle East to make a new life for himself. Due to a war in the region his family, who had previously ostracized him, now fled to his home to live with him. He received them without recrimination and reported that they have now also accepted the faith claims of Christ. Though this is not stated by Noor, one would expect his gracious receiving of his newly displaced family and his consequent lifestyle had much to do with their conversion.

- Patterns of mission (the center):

The City Church community expressed through the center defines mission as primarily evangelism or witness and the discipling of people who have newly converted to Christianity. Boutros expounds on this thinking by saying:

> And that's actually the only way that it can grow, is by actually living that out, is by really loving one another – that's the thing that attracts people to Christ and to be part of that movement.

He states that among the core group, those that have made a public profession of faith in the person and teachings of Christ, the majority have embraced the concept and practice of mission in one form or another. He shares that most of the evangelism/witness of the center is carried out by the core group (as opposed to the leadership). Even those who have newly professed their conversion publicly are active in witness, particularly to those with whom they have a relationship.

Boutros also reiterated the power of public, and generally safe, space and how that public space creates opportunities for witness and community. He sees that the ability to "hang out" aids in allowing people to informally engage with the gospel message and to take time to have their questions answered. He also sees it as a particularly effective tool in interacting with women, listening to their concerns and answering the particular questions that they have.

- Patterns of mission (the Kurdish fellowship):

The patterns of mission in the Kurdish church draw heavily on the experience of the adherents. As Noor detailed, the Bible and the gospel message have "good news" for the Kurds, particularly in addressing their felt need for a viable identity, so it would appear that much of their evangelism is expressed within this paradigm. Noor sees the use of identity as a starting point

for discussing the message of Christ as highly effective. He sees his people as deeply wounded, often rejected by other groups and societies in the Middle East and commonly treated as outcasts. The goal of the Kurdish people is to achieve an official identity and recognition in society. Noor and others often use this critical felt need as a basis for sharing their own particular faith journey and the discoveries that they have made regarding the person and teachings of Christ. As previously mentioned, they share their belief that Kurds are mentioned in the Christian Scriptures and in consequence do derive some esteem from that fact. This places the Christian Scriptures in a favorable light with the Kurdish people.

In the interview, Noor also gave many examples of how they have been exploring Kurdish folklore, traditions, proverbs, etc., to use as redemptive analogies that would point to the gospel message of Christ. They also use the occasions of Islamic/Kurdish religious feasts like *Ramadan* (though the adherents do not fast), *Newroz*[92] and *Eid al Adha*[93] as conversation starters. Despite being known by the wider society as Kurds who do not care about Islam, their obvious concern for each other and for the poor, and their commitment to living an upright lifestyle seems to give them a credible platform to engage other Kurds in religious discussions.

Despite the fact that four years ago the outreach conducted by the center was highly programmatic, the Kurdish fellowship seems to move in a highly relational, evangelistic paradigm. There is much time spent, according to Noor, in home visits and in sitting and explaining their faith convictions in one-on-one conversations. Finally, Noor believes that many seekers are drawn to the center and to the Kurdish fellowship because of the love and concern that they see expressed among the different members of the congregation. He states:

> Some people come for food, but the Kurdish gathering offers no food. We meet to hold each other's hands and encourage each other. I always tell people, "My family is in ___ so I need you, you are like my family." Our goal is to live as a community, like Jesus said, "love one another as I have loved you." Lots of people are tasting this, believing, and sharing. Lots of people ask for prayer for their husbands, who are starting to change. Or another man came last week, asking for us to pray for his father. So if they didn't taste God's love, they wouldn't keep coming. I don't give food, milk or medicine, but they keep coming back, which means they experienced something through the way they are treated or prayed for, and they are reacting to it by coming again and committing. This commitment is what allows me to say they have experienced God.

[92] A new year/spring celebration that often has Kurdish nationalistic overtones. See Dan Murphy, "For Kurds, a Day of Bonfires, Legends, and Independence," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 23, 2004, http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0323/p07s02-woiq.html.

[93] A Muslim religious holy day, literally meaning "Feast of Sacrifice." See Thomas W. Lippman, *Understanding Islam: An Introduction to the Muslim World*, 3rd Revised ed. (New York: Meridian, 1995), 28.

Summary

This description gave an update on various aspects of the City Church. The interviews revealed the transference of the home groups examined in the first round of interviews and also the emergence of a Kurdish-speaking fellowship that was birthed from the adherents of the center. As Boutros was asked how he would describe community at the City Church, he spoke of the importance of public space in giving people safety and time to be integrated into a new community. He also spoke of the forming of a layer of leadership displaying ethnic unity. The City Church community stresses leaving behind Islam and its adherents' previous religious identity and embracing instead the Christian community. The City Church members regard suffering (including persecution) as the normal result of holding to their faith convictions. The Kurdish fellowship shares similar convictions regarding suffering and certainly the embracing of a new Christian identity as Kurds. Many in the Kurdish fellowship have suffered in some way.

The two congregations also have a strong missional vision. The non-Kurdish community, having changed their methodology, focusses on using the center's public space and the attractional momentum of a large gathering of people to aid in its missional goals of proclamation and teaching. The Kurdish fellowship, as insiders, looks to use metaphorical bridges between Islam, Kurdish culture, etc., and their newfound faith convictions to communicate their message. They also address the common felt need of Kurdish identity and present the Christian faith as a viable answer to that dilemma, at least on a spiritual level. Common themes around mission and community formation, held by each of the five fellowships, will be examined and discussed in a later section.

The Village Church Network

Introduction

Four years after the initial interviews, in April 2015, I was able to return and formally interview Mahboub, the leader of the Village Church network. The interview was held over two sessions, the first for an hour and the second for an hour and a half. As noted earlier, he is a married man in his late thirties, of Shiite background, who oversees a small network of house churches in the rural area where he was born, raised, and continues to live. In effect, he works within his own community. Since the last round of interviews his wife has given birth to a daughter which has resulted in health issues for her and the new infant.[94] Though he continues to be very active in

[94] Mahboub: "OK, I am (Mahboub), I am originally from ___. I am from Muslim Shiite background. I'm married and I have a daughter, her name is ___. I'm living right now in ___ district. We have ministry among local Sunni and Shiite, Bedouin and gypsy."

his community, he does face some opposition and has had a *fatwa*[95] issued against him in the past.[96]

This section describes the church network's growth over the past four years and the development of that growth into the Sunni community. Mahboub shares about the church's missional vision and praxis, their attitude toward society and Islam, and their perspective on suffering.

Description

- Update:

Mahboub's network of house churches has grown to eleven groups attended by people who are officially Shiite. In addition, he also works extensively with seven leaders from ___ that would have an official Sunni identity. These seven leaders all have groups, with several having multiple groups, but as Mahboub's primary focus is the leaders, he visits these groups only on occasion.[97] The seven leaders and their groups follow the Discovery Bible Study format. This is in contrast with the Shiite background groups, where Mahboub appears to play a more active role and leads those eleven groups personally.[98] He also has some involvement in three home groups among non-evangelical Christians and a group gathered from among Bedouin and gypsies.[99] However, for the sake of brevity and clarity this study will restrict itself to the main area of focus for Mahboub, i.e. the Shiite and Sunni Muslim churches.

After four years it has emerged that the various meetings are conducted in different ways according to their different religious and cultural backgrounds. All the meetings are conducted in a place of residence, be it a village house or a refugee tent, and appear from Mahboub's description to be quite informal.[100] The core of the groups' attendees is from the family of the

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[95] *Merriam-Webster Dictionary, s.v.* "a legal opinion or decree handed down by an Islamic religious leader," accessed May 30, 2016, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fatwa. Though the legal opinion or decree is not limited to a pronouncement of death or a declaration of war, Mahboub certainly sees the fatwa issued against him as life threatening. See "What Is a Fatwa?" accessed May 30, 2016, http://www.islamicsupremecouncil.org/understanding-islam/legal-rulings/44-what-is-a-fatwa.html.

[96] Mahboub: "Honestly I can tell, even when ___ signed my *fatwa* to kill me in 2008, it's nothing in (comparison) with what happened to ___'s kids or to ___, this boy, or to ___, the other girl."

[97] Mahboub: "Among the Muslim Shiites I have 11 (groups). Among the Sunni I can't talk about groups with the (Sunni) more than with individuals. With the (Sunni) I am like now discipling leaders, they have their own groups. With the (Sunni) I am discipling about seven leaders."

[98] Mahboub: "With the Shiite people I'm not doing DBS. With the (Sunni), yes. With the Shiite people, the reason for that (is that) I am…teaching (more) because according to their culture they believe that to be like a leader and they will follow him. And they listen more to you if you are teaching."

[99] Mahboub: "And there are also Christians, but with the Christians…I'm just like establishing the group and I'm not leading it. Even I don't do follow-up. So I'm just giving…guidance from one guy to another to the leaders of the group, like do this or do that…we have 3 groups."

[100] Mahboub: "I don't like, sorry, the Western structure. Because the Bedouin structure is more convincing to me. What do I mean by this? Can you imagine the Bedouin are sitting, all these men together, every day and talk. And

group leader (as is the case with the Sunni groups) or the family of the residence where the meeting is taking place. The Sunni meetings revolve around highly-participatory, inductive study facilitated by the host while Mahboub takes a prominent leadership/teacher role in the Shiite groups. The Shiites would meet twice or three times a month, mainly due to balancing Mahboub's busy schedule with the availability of the group to meet, while the gatherings among the Sunni appear to be more fluid and spontaneous.[101] All the meetings contain elements of prayer, open sharing, teaching, and discussion. The Eucharist is also celebrated on occasion. There did not appear to be any time for singing and no mention was made of a regular financial offering being collected. The groups do not meet regularly with other groups, though Mahboub has conducted combined worship events (separated by gender) three times in the past.[102] As will be discussed in more detail later, Mahboub regards the Sunni background fellowships as more mature and more missional than the Shiite background fellowships. He attributes this disparity partly to the Shiite preoccupation with politics and the placement of at least some of their hopes and aspirations in that arena.[103]

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the topic of conversation all the time is about God and one person comes…let's sit and pray. And then the others OK let's worship God right now. And the other is saying like I love this story about God. And then they come with them. So all the conversation from 6 until 10 pm it is all about God. And the presence of God exists on the tent with this people. Instead of us having meeting when we finish a meeting then we continue our chatting.
This is the same with the Shiite people when I talked about Ashura last time. Not about Ashura as a celebration or as a festival of Hussein, no, no, no. I'm talking about the way they did it. The way they did it. Like this is what God are expecting from us to do. It's not like, the style life of a… Not just like you do worship, you do like OK, we will start with worship. We will pray, worship, Bible study, and then worship and then done. And what's the conversation after it? But can you imagine like the people are celebrating 40 days of worshipping? 40 days of prayer? 40 days of like – this is happened in Ashura. 40 days! People, Shiite people, are celebrating Hussein! These people who doesn't have Jesus are doing this. Why we don't do it?"

[101] Mahboub: "What I'm doing is instead of being very formal in our groups, very formal in our meetings, I'm giving things more like, it's matching with the Arab mentality which is like every time they have gatherings they have serious subjects they can talk about. If we use these serious subjects to be about Jesus, with non-formal setting, and what do I mean by that? Instead of being like you have not to talk, you have to listen and now we will do this and do that. This is very formal and this is very systematic. It is important, and it is important later but in the beginning for these leaders to plant the seed it should be informal, it should be very spontaneous. OK, to benefit from the time, to benefit from any small meeting God has prepared for you so to share the gospel and to talk about the love of the Christ."

[102] Mahboub: "I have meetings, I bring all, I bring the people from different…I did it like 3 times. Yeah, but it's not only a conference…it's like they are worshipping God, the subject was about Jesus. It's not just like a meeting, it was more about focusing about God. I do it for all the men alone and for all the ladies alone."

[103] Mahboub: "Unfortunately until now, in the 11 Shiite churches, (I have to) keep pushing and pushing and pushing hard. And the reason for that is the values of these (Shiite), (they are) not strong enough as the values I saw in the life of the leaders with the (Sunni). But I am still the same person who is discipling both. Why this has happened here…in a good way with the (Sunni), it is not (with) the (Shiite) Muslims. Because most of the time… when you come to your house church with the Muslim Shiite people, the political subject comes (up). And I was facing problems in (getting) this subject out of the conversation. And the reason (for) that is the Shiite people in the last 20, 25 years, like to talk (about) politics a lot. So now I am praying like God to give me wisdom how to avoid a political discussion."

- The shape of community:

The network of churches in the villages is based around individual families (nuclear and extended) with other participants that are invited in to join the family group. This is true of both the Shiite and the Sunni groups.[104] This in turn encourages a high level of trust among the adherents, who have either known each other for a long period of time or are from the same extended family.[105] This could only be considered a strength in a potentially hostile environment but also in an environment where high value is placed on family loyalty.[106] This also allows for mixed sexes to worship together if the group is restricted to immediate family (although some groups are single gender). It does, however, mean by default that the groups are almost entirely homogeneous with no contact between Shiite and Sunni groups. In both the Sunni and Shiite background groups the members choose if any new people can attend the meetings. Mahboub believes this fosters fellowship as people feel more at ease with each other. He also sees this as combating what he perceives as a high level of distrust found in Muslim societies.

He states:

> I'm giving…the right for the families or for the people to choose who will be in the group or not. I'm not asking (any more) why this one is here or he's not here. The reason for that is (that) I discovered that this is a cultural thing. Among Muslims they don't trust each other easily, so I prefer the groups to be (ones) they created or established…so they feel free to talk and open (up) their hearts in the groups.

People can be removed from the group. This will be discussed later in a descriptive section on leadership. Mahboub also mentioned that he did arrange a wider worship meeting (gender specific) on three different occasions where the various groups could gather for a corporate meeting.

There are other elements of common practice that help to form boundaries for the community. Mahboub is teaching endogamy as a Biblical principle[107] and the group practices adult baptism for those whom Mahboub considers sufficiently "strong in their faith." He observes that he is more ready to baptize those from the Sunni background followers, but remains confused about the followers from the Shiite community. Even though they are reading the Scriptures, maintaining a personal devotional life, and, in Mahboub's opinion, obeying God (this may be a

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[104] Interviewer: "the Shiite groups?" Mahboub: "It is a family unit…they are all related to each other." Mahboub: "You keep it within the family. And keep it within relations, friends, cousins, with people. Because of this it's easier with the ___ (Sunni). Because they still have these relations between the tribes, between the families…"

[105] See previous footnote.

[106] Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 24.

[107] Mahboub: "…And how do you see God in this passage? Do you think it is good to let your daughter marry, for example, to a Muslim man and you are a believer right now?"

reference to living morally upright lives), he does not see them actively sharing their faith convictions nor leading groups. This leads him to question the genuineness of their faith commitment and in consequence has only baptized a few from among them.[108] The Eucharist continues to be celebrated but the onus still remains with the adherent if he or she wishes to partake or not (see round one interview). Mahboub, as leader, does not make that decision. It remains a boundary marker of sorts (i.e. other groups of Muslims do not celebrate the Eucharist) but is not a clear indication of who is regarded as in or out of the group.[109]

Another influence on the shape of the community in the Village Church network is the appointing of leaders and the model of leadership that they exercise. It would appear that Mahboub appoints all of the small group leaders. He looks for those with natural leadership gifting and often chooses those who are already leaders in their families (heads of families, if possible).[110] He sees this as retaining the natural lines of authority and also regards it as culturally appropriate. This also quite naturally flows into Mahboub's belief that leaders need to be of the same people (culturally and relationally) as the group.[111] However, in his thinking, this is not the ultimate qualification for leading one of these small fellowships. Mahboub examines their relationship with God and he looks for a passion to know God and to learn more about him.[112] Another quality he looks for in a leader is the ability to persevere.[113] As deep relationships are the basis for his authority, which he exercises on occasion,[114] Mahboub seeks

[108] Mahboub: "I (am) still confused about this…I don't know when these people (actually) give their life to Jesus and nobody will know. But with the (Sunni) I felt from the first day these people can (be) baptized. I am totally trusting that these people from (Sunni background) are being built as strong believers. With the Shiites…they obey God, they read verses, verses from the Bible, they have their own quiet time, but because I didn't see them sharing the gospel or leading other groups, so I… Even we (had a) lesson about baptism, but only 4 (have been baptized so far)."

[109] Mahboub: "Who gave us the right to judge others – you're talking about the breaking of bread…So who can judge others and say you deserve this, you don't deserve this. So God taught me…you can do it with everyone because we don't know exactly when God touches the hearts of these people. You don't know. So who I am to tell people not to break bread? Because I don't want these people to feel that like there's things (in) the Bible they can't do…yet."

[110] Mahboub: "If you want to talk about the criteria for choosing the leader, everyone is a leader…I'm talking about the natural leaders. What is the criteria of (a) leader? For ___'s family he's the leader for his family. For ___, he's the leader for his family."

[111] Mahboub: "I prefer the leader to be from the same people, to disciple his people. And I believe also that he knows the challenges and the weaknesses and the opportunities and he knows everything about his culture, so it should be…"

[112] Mahboub: "…I'm not choosing people according to criteria…I'm choosing people according to his relationship with God. What do I mean by this? All of them have a relationship with God. But I'm saying there's someone who's having this passion to learn more about God. Not about qualifications or (if) his Arabic (is) good."

[113] Mahboub: "…in our culture it is a problem. Who has the long breath (perseverance) to continue the journey."

[114] In areas as varied as encouraging people to stop using folk medicine to ward off evil spirits or to stop smoking to banning people from a group for unbiblical behavior.

to show respect to the leaders he appoints. He will not rebuke them in public,[115] and says he sits quietly in the meetings as a sign of support as they lead. He encourages the appointed leaders to use Scripture as their authority and to be humble and to be open and honest with the group, accepting prayer and encouragement from the group in times of need.[116] Clearly, though he seeks to use the existing leadership structure if possible, Mahboub also seeks to reinterpret what leadership looks like in a religious/spiritual setting. He encourages the leaders to start discipling their own families first, as he did, but also to be active in not only leading their groups but in sharing Bible stories and verses with others.[117] He doesn't expect them to be expert teachers but rather able to share what they know.[118]

On occasion church discipline has been enforced. Mahboub shares the instance where he stopped one young man from continuing on with the group because of what appeared to be a deep-seated hatred and a desire for revenge against a particular people group. It can be gathered from the interview that the young man was unrepentant in his attitude and was barred from returning to the group.

He explains:

> The reason I want to kick him out of the group is (that) I don't want ___ or others to (be influenced by) him (in the matter of) revenge. I told him clearly if you want to obey the word of the God, you have to obey it as it is. If you would tell me that you want to teach yourself how to love, I will help you. But if you keep insisting you love Jesus, but you hate…yes, I was clear, I told him I know that you love Jesus. And I know that you care about your people in ___. But revenge is something not in the Bible. (In) Jesus there is no enemy, the only enemy is Satan.

Another example was given of one leader who forbade an adherent from attending because of continued unacceptable behavior. This unacceptable behavior seemed to be more of a tribal issue and, for the group's reputation's sake, he was no longer allowed to attend.[119]

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[115] Mahboub: "So I can't for example rebuke any of the leaders in front of people. Even if he did something wrong. So you have to show him love…You have to respect him. I'm saying like you have to treat him in a very good way in front of the people. You have to honor him…"

[116] Mahboub: "The leader (makes a) mistake when they don't allow the groups to pray for him."

[117] Mahboub: "…I'm asking…are you sharing these verses with others, are you telling the stories about the Jesus with others? So each one has his own group and from the beginning I encouraged these leaders to disciple their own families, to start with their own families, because like it will be a good example for them. Because this is what I did with my wife."

[118] Mahboub: "The other thing is (that there) is no need to be (an) expert about the Bible and about theology. No, no, it's like even you (know) one thing about the Bible, you want to share it, you have the right to share it. So I told them clearly."

[119] Mahboub: "He did it with…there's one person in his group, he kicked him out. I didn't ask him about that, I respected (his decision *implied*). He said… it's a tribal problem… and the other one did bad things and he said…this is not good for our image, for our relationships, for our group."

As mentioned previously, one gets the impression from the interviews that the meetings seem to be both highly fluid in form[120] and deeply relational. Rejecting Western style meetings as too restrictive, Mahboub has encouraged the meetings to be very interactive, especially among the Sunni. The Shiite meetings tend toward more structure, partly due to Mahboub being the study leader. Mahboub also gives freedom to the participants as to how and where the group meets and, to a certain extent, what the group does. It is clear that there is a high value placed not only on having an informal and personal meeting as a small group but also on the relationships between the attendees themselves. Mahboub observes that not only are people, including himself, very involved in each other's lives (made easier by being related or having a strong relationship before forming the group) but there also must be forgiveness and acceptance. He shared with one of the groups, "If you don't love each other, it means you are not following Christ." He believes that he sees this value expressed in the book of Acts and as such it forms one of his core convictions as a leader.[121] He shared in the interview about the issues that inter-ethnic rivalry can bring into the groups but how they have seen reconciliation over time.[122] Knowing the process takes time, he does not see this as a reason for someone to be ousted from any of the groups (with one notable exception which is discussed in the section on leadership).[123]

When asked if there is anything incorporated into the community that would be distinctly from the Shiite or Sunni socio-religious traditions, Mahboub states that he seeks to be culturally sensitive and adapts accordingly. For instance, he changes his instructional and/or leadership style according to the group he is with at a particular time. With the Shiite, he feels his

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[120] Previously quoted: Mahboub: "I don't like, sorry, the Western structure. Because the Bedouin structure is more convincing (to) me. What do I mean by this? Can you imagine the Bedouin are sitting, all these men together, every day and talk. And the topic of conversation all the time is about God and one person comes… it's come let's sit and pray. And then the others OK let's worship God right now. And the other is saying like I love this story about God. And then they come with them. So all the conversation from 6 until 10 pm it is all about God. And the presence of God exists on the tent with this people. Instead of us having meeting when we finish a meeting then we continue our chatting."

[121] Mahboub: "Even for me, now…the Shiite people are fighting on (in) ___. And to me this is a challenge and the challenge is …I love, I have this heart for the ___ and I have heart for the Muslim Sunni. And I'm discipling both of them. And every time I want to tell to the ___ sorry that my people (are) fighting against you in ___… And I did it with the ___5 years ago. I told them clearly that I have to apologize because my people in ___ are killing you or kidnapping your wives and your kids and your daughters. So forgive me (for) what my people (are) doing. And this is the love, I feel it in this passage."

[122] Mahboub: "I can talk about the groups… Bedouin and gypsy, (regarding) this verse exactly. They're big haters… Bedouin look down at the gypsies. They talk like we have to forgive but in fact they didn't forgive. It took time (for) them to forgive each other. It's not easy. ___ and ___, even both of them are Bedouin, and originally they are from the same background, from the same family. ___ and ___ hated each other to the extreme. Now they are best friends. Now it is different because of the love of Christ."

[123] Mahboub: "Every time (I'm with) the groups I am telling them, especially when we talk to the Bedouin and the gypsy and saying like if you don't love, it means you are not a follower. But I say I am not kicking anybody outside of the group, I'm giving people time...Because to live with hatred… and Satan is living in your life for a long time, it's not easy in one day."

leadership style is more top-down whereas with the Sunni he comes alongside as more of a mentor. He sees this as more suited to each of the community's dynamics.[124] With Sunni groups he encourages them to do the inductive Discovery Bible Study methodology but in the Shiite groups he takes on most of the teaching personally. He also sees the Sunni people as having a cultural trait of putting a high value on generosity. He seeks to channel that in what he perceives is a more biblical way, urging them to pray before they automatically give to someone.[125] The Shiites, he feels, are the opposite (which is also reflective of their culture) and so urges them to be more generous, particularly toward each other.[126] He also sees that the Sunni have more of a tendency toward memorization, more so than the Shiites, and seeks to channel that trait toward the biblical text.[127] As to other socio-religious distinctives (like women wearing the *hijab*),[128] he was quite happy to encourage this and in fact sees it as respectful as long as biblical values are maintained.[129]

Officially, the group members are still regarded as Muslims (either Shiite or Sunni) but have been taught to distance themselves from practicing the religion of Islam. Mahboub regards the Muslim understanding of God as erroneous. He states:

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[124] Though one wonders if as a Shiite himself Mahboub is more comfortable taking charge among his own socio-religious group.

[125] Mahboub: "I discovered that Near East peoples (in the refugee camps) are giving money to each other. And sometimes they borrow money from each other. And even the believers from the groups contribute and sometimes people are taking advantage of them to take their money. So, I told (them) you have to stop this…until you ask God about it, if God wants you to contribute right now. Culturally…they are very generous…biblically they have to ask God, (does) God want me to pay or not?"

[126] Mahboub: "And for Lebanese, it's different. Like you have to encourage them to pay! It's two different cultures. But I am not saying like this is a right example and this is bad example. The good example is from the Bible. We have to give. For the Lebanese you have to encourage them to pay and for the Near East peoples you have to be wise about the contribution, maybe sometimes you are wasting your time."

[127] Mahboub: "…Muslim Sunni are…people (who are) reading the Qur'an (more) and…you (can encourage) this habit toward reading the Bible regularly. And I discovered also that the Muslim Sunni are memorizing a lot of verses from the Qur'an. So what I am doing is right now I'm making a turn, a big turn…(in) their lifestyle by memorizing a lot of verses from the Bible…any time I mention any of the verses they look at it in the Bible and then they memorize it. And among the Shiite they didn't do it, I didn't find people doing it."

[128] A veil (literally a "cover") worn by Muslim women that may hold religious, moral, or cultural significance for the wearer and for the society around her. See Theodore Gabriel and Rabiha Hannan, eds., *Islam and the Veil: Theoretical and Regional Contexts*, 1st edition (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 14-16.

[129] Mahboub: "I can give you an example…___ (has been) in discipleship for almost 2 years. Two weeks ago, she covered (*hijab literally means cover*) her head. And this is (a requirement) from her dad and her mom. People asked me…she's in a Bible study and why she's (covering her head)? I said I totally respect what she did…I don't want her parents to feel that like we are changing their habits and we are changing their style of life. No, we are with Jesus - it's something different. It's like the values (are) more important than these small details. And her image among her people will be much better. So ___ can (cover her head) and she can (be) a follower of Jesus. And there's a place for everyone in the kingdom of God."

> No, their God is different – what they are talking about their God (shows that he) is different... So, these small details (are) important.[130]

In consequence Mahboub leads the faith community in creating distance between Islam and the Village Churches. The adherents are encouraged not to participate in Islamic practices like fasting in *Ramadan*, celebrating *Ashura*,[131] reciting the *surat al fatiha*[132] at funerals, etc.,[133] with Mahboub believing that to do so is an act of compromise. Some common Islamic terms are used as the adherents live out their daily lives in their own specific context, but with little significance attached to these terms. Mahboub states that most of the Village Church members (both Shiite and Sunni) were serious observers of Islam before they joined the fellowships but now are not.[134]

Mahboub continues to teach the Village Church members that they are not Christian but to identify themselves as followers of Christ. He describes himself as a believer in Jesus as described in the New Testament.[135] To Mahboub this means distinguishing between adhering to the Christian religion (i.e. being a Christian) and being obedient to the teachings found in the Bible (i.e. being a follower).[136] In consequence, the Village Churches do not celebrate any of the recognized Christian holy days except for Christmas and Easter.[137] Interestingly, during that time they exchange the traditional Christian greetings (i.e. He is risen, He is risen indeed) which may be perceived as a community marker, just as the occasional *Eid Mushtarak* (this feast we are all sharing) is in Muslim communities. This could be in tension with the maintenance of a cultural Shiite or Sunni identity but Mahboub regards teaching on incarnation, crucifixion, and

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[130] The full quote is: "And so I'm using this to tell that no, we don't use these terms because we will show people that everything it is the same. So it is like their God is like our God. No, their God is different – what they are talking about their God (shows that he) is different. So, these small details (are) important."

[131] 10th day of Muharrem – a day of remembrance for both Sunni and Shiites, albeit for different historical events. See Francis E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 204-215, and Najam Haider, *Shi'i Islam: An Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4.

[132] First chapter of the Qur'an.

[133] Mahboub: "We don't celebrate any of the Muslim things (holy days)…we don't fast Ramadan. You have to respect the habits around you, don't eat in front of them. But (that) doesn't mean that you are fasting. The people have to know that you are not fasting but don't eat in front of them. And even if they invited you to eat *el iftar*, (there is) no need to do any of the Islamic habits (from the context: practices) because you are creating bad habits (practices) among them."

[134] Mahboub: "___ was very Islamic fanatic, and most of them are very Islamic. I'm talking about the Shiite and the Sunni. Both of them they were very Islamic…but now they are not."

[135] Mahboub: "Yes, I'm saying…you are not a Christian, I'm teaching them you are not a Christian, and you are not going to be Christians. Maybe your kids will be Christians but you are not, you are just a follower of Jesus. Even for me, when I am introducing myself…I'm a believer in Jesus according to the New Testament. I believe in Jesus as it's mentioned in the Bible."

[136] Mahboub: "I'm a follower of Jesus Christ, I'm NOT (Mahboub's emphasis) a Christian. And there's a big difference. Christianity is a religion, and to be a follower is to obey every verse from the Bible."

[137] Mahboub: "And (as for) me, the *holy days* of Christianity - I don't care about them. I care about what's mentioned in the Bible. So of course I love Christmas and I love Easter, I'm celebrating like any other Christian man."

resurrection as critical, and emphasizes them. The groups also tend to meet more often as churches during that time as a result.[138] They do not attend the established Christian churches, which seems to be in keeping with their maintaining of their community identity of birth, but prefer to meet in their houses or tents. As Mahboub states:

> And even I'm mentioning this to these leaders, like (there is) no need to attend a church, no need to be a member in a church, you can worship God in your tent. And you can be a good servant and you can be a good leader, it doesn't mean that you have to dress (in) fancy clothes and to go to church on Sunday. Because this is a church and this is mentioned in the Bible. "Everyone who gathers there I am in the midst of it." This is the model; this is the template I'm expecting.

He remains resolute as he communicates his idea of what is their identity.[139] Mahboub states:

> Yes, I'm saying…you are not Christian, I'm teaching to them you are not Christian, and you are not going to be Christians. Maybe your kids will be Christians but you are not, you are just followers of Jesus.

This is reinforced with some of the historical enmity that exists between the Muslim and Christian communities:

> …In the Middle East unfortunately the Christians look down on the Muslims. And they consider them from a different tribe, from even a different kind of people. And these terms hurt the feelings of…the newcomers from Muslim background to Christ. One of the pastors, I (was visiting him) and ___ was sitting with me and we had been talking about the Jesus. And we'd been talking…and the pastor mentioned a sentence in front of the Muslim, who is a newcomer to Christ, he mentioned like "this country is giving visas to this trash from Muslim Sunni from ___." So I thought this is a big mistake, I know that the pastor didn't mean to hurt him, but he did. ___ after 10, 15 minutes he decided to leave (and) to go outside of the room.

Adherents in the Village Church network do face difficulties, trials, and various forms of persecution. Some of the suffering is due to the circumstances of life (including the two civil wars in the region) where some members have lost homes, livelihoods, and, on occasion, loved

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[138] Mahboub: "For Easter…when you say 'Christ is risen,' you have to teach them how to say, 'He is risen indeed.' But at Christmas it doesn't mean we have to bring gifts. This is a social (thing)…it's not religious at all. It's something social. But no, when you talk about the resurrection…you talk about God (being) a living God and that Jesus is a living God and He overcame death and rose the third day, so it's something important…you go into details about it, you use it as an occasion to tell the story of the crucifixion. People (from the context: the wider community) will discover in these days…we do things together more than normal times."

[139] Dutch notes seven distinct self-descriptions that he has observed BMBs using in the Middle East. Mahboub's position is one that Dutch has described in other contexts. See Bernard Dutch, "Should Muslims Become 'Christians'?" *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17, no. 1 (2000): 15-24.

ones. As Mahboub states, "… (a) lady come to me, (and) said, '…I lost my brothers and my dad in one night in Syria.' Honestly I didn't know the theology of suffering until I met the ___(Sunni)." There is some persecution for the church's faith convictions also, usually in the form of ostracism, severe criticism, or being disinherited from family property, etc. These are difficult burdens to bear in an honor/shame society where relationships, particularly with family, are prized.[140] Although little mention was made of adherents suffering physically for their new beliefs, Mahboub himself, as previously noted, has had a fatwa placed upon his life. Through all of these difficulties it was reported that the attendees are standing firm. Mahboub sees suffering as the evidence of the adherents' new faith and also regards suffering as normative in the life of the follower of Jesus.[141] This is according to his understanding of John 16:33.[142]

- Patterns of mission:

The patterns of mission of the Village Church network are heavily influenced, as one would expect, by the life and practice of Mahboub, the church planter. He attempts to lead by example, modeling the walk of a Christ-follower and using his own life experiences to illustrate the principles he is attempting to teach, particularly in the area of evangelism.[143] He attempts to have a participatory style of teaching, though possibly has this more with the Sunni than with the Shiite groups, according to the interview. He also seeks to empower his house church leaders into leading the fellowships and into evangelism. As issues arise in the groups - for example, the issue of revenge he mentions in his interview - he uses them as teaching opportunities and also as opportunities for witness.[144]

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[140] See Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (Tucson: Recovery Resources Press, 2007), 103-125.

[141] After reciting John 16:33 Mahboub states: "For Muslims…this is (significant) evidence to their faith. Suffering. If you are leading a comfortable life, it seems like something's wrong. I can talk about myself in this (regard)…my parents didn't give me my inheritance. It was clear. Also there are people who say we hate you because you (have) changed, but this (is) evidence to your faith."

[142] "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." John 16:33

[143] Mahboub: "So even you have only one verse and this is what I'm doing even with the Bedouin and the gypsy girls, and how we share the gospel. I'm saying like you have like this information about God and you have like this verse you know just go and do it. Because this is what I'm doing with my daughter, I'm not giving lessons to my daughter, I'm just telling my daughter, can we write this verse together? Then after one week or two I say, do you remember the words, can you share it with me? So it is the same with the leaders, like Abdul Karim, it is the same with Abu Ahmad, it is the same with all these leaders."

[144] Mahboub: "And I still remember one of the nights where all of the people gathered and I was talking about revenge. And I was talking from Ezekiel about God is not happy when bad people die because God is expecting like these people to give their lives to Him and for these people to obey God. And I don't know the meaning – (Arabic) – to repent. And I was sharing this and then I come to the love. And we talked about the love and about forgiveness and all this. And during that time I discovered like one of the listeners his brother is with Nusra in Syria, he has the same, he believe about the same, we should not do revenge, we have to forgive. And it was a good time for me to hunt or to fish, to discover a new potential among the group. And now I am going to spend more time with this man."

Mahboub continues to emphasize inward life change not only as a necessary conforming to biblical values but also due to his conviction that transformed lives are crucial for effective witness.

He states:

> It is very important in the Islamic culture, it is very, very important (that) the people use (their) lives as a witness for the gospel. And the people (around them) would say like this God is strong, this God is a right God.

He sees it worked out in living honest and transparent lives and he urges all those in the Village Church network to use every opportunity to share about their belief in the person of Christ.[145] This is reflected in how Mahboub strongly emphasizes the need for the followers to maintain a good reputation in the community. Though they meet in homes or tents, their studies are not done in secret. On the contrary, inquisitive neighbors would know what was going on in those meetings. Even the Eucharist is celebrated in front of everybody and, if there is a visitor, he too is invited to partake. In this way, nothing is done in secret (shamefully) or behind closed doors but rather in the open and with honor.

A high number of groups in the Village Church network are Involved in ongoing relational witness to family, friends, and neighbors. This has been one of the axioms of the house churches, both Sunni and Shiite, namely that everyone evangelizes and disciples those that he or she knows. Though it is apparent from the interviews that not everyone is following through on this principle, Mahboub is assured that many adherents do share their faith convictions with those with whom they commonly associate. He emphasizes that it is all done within the appropriate social norms of age and gender. Interestingly, the church planter also mentions that in the case of someone coming to faith outside of the circle of known relationships, he or she is encouraged to start their own group of seekers (most probably through the format of Discovery Bible Study) and proceed to disciple that group rather than join one of the existing groups as a stranger. By default this principle does make the groups lean toward being homogeneous.

Another axiom that the Village Churches hold to is “everyone shares what he knows.” There is no need for any adherent to be mature or to be a teacher before they start sharing what they know about Christ, their faith, etc. Mahboub holds the attendees accountable to this principle (at least the leaders) and regularly asks if they are sharing what they have learned the previous week. Interestingly, the DBS format does lend itself to encouraging adherents to do just that. It also discourages the concept of bringing an inquirer to the point of decision (e.g. “praying the

[145] Mahboub: “So you have to benefit from every occasion to show people that you are a follower of Christ. So in your relationship with your neighbors. In your relationship with your wife, with your kids. With your honesty, with your transparency. So the people has to know, your kids in the school, the teacher has to know that your kids are, their parents are believers.”

sinner's prayer") but rather encourages the seeker to be committed to a series of biblical studies. The knowledge that she gleans from the studies she is committed to put into practice in some way during the week. She is also committed to sharing what she learned that week with someone close to her. Inquirers generally come to claim the faith teachings of Christ as their own sometime over a span of months.

Also found among the Village Churches is the intent to be as culturally relevant and appropriate as theologically possible. Partly due to the cultural-insider nature of the Village Churches, they shy away from what is acceptable in a typical local evangelical church and lean toward what would be acceptable in a local mosque. As was described previously, this sometimes affects the gender make-up of the meetings, the interaction between the sexes, and the sex and age of the leaders, depending on the meeting. This is all done so that the missional expression of the churches will not be hindered by socially questionable behavior in a Middle Eastern rural setting. As was seen in the section on community, adherents in the Village Churches do face suspicion, rejection, ostracism, and other forms of persecution. This is not, however, due to behavior that would appear to be socially shameful but rather for an open and honest sharing of their newfound faith convictions.

Summary

What we have witnessed over the last four years is significant growth and diversification in the Village Church network. Mahboub has led an expansion into the Sunni Muslim community (not to mention the groups among the Bedouin, gypsy, and traditional Christian communities that Mahboub oversees but that fall outside the limits of this study) and has seen multiple new groups formed. Generally, the groups are built around family units, with clear boundaries and established leadership. The meetings themselves tend to be quite fluid in structure, certainly culturally sensitive, and deeply relational. The Village Churches are clear about who they are now. They have left Islam and now believe in the person of Christ and follow his teachings. They would see themselves as cultural Muslims still rooted in their society, and do not wish to be adopted into the wider Christian community. This attitude has created tensions in their community and certainly has resulted in some varied forms of persecution. In this they have remained firm in their convictions and continue to openly share their beliefs both verbally and through changed (or changing!) lifestyles which conform to the teachings of Christ. Many of them love their enemies and do good to those that persecute them. This attitude of perseverance under trial and a clear consistent sharing of their beliefs is a value that is held by most of the Village Church adherents.

The Camp Church Network

Introduction

In March of 2015 I was able to conduct a one-hour interview with Mohammed and Isa in a coffee shop. Both are educators and are leading the church network in the area where they were raised and continue to work. Mohammed is single while Isa is married with a family. Both still see themselves and the other Camp Church adherents as Muslims who are also "followers of Isa." In the interview they described the significant new growth that the church network had experienced and also shared that the churches had instituted the Eucharist as a new ritual. They looked at the issues surrounding remaining closely tied to Islam as a religion, the patterns of mission of the church network, and the way in which their community is not only growing but also taking shape.

Description

- Update:

Two years ago this study described a group of nine vibrant churches situated in long-term Palestinian refugee camps in the Near East. At that time only men of the fellowships met, usually weekly, in groups of eight to ten. After two years the camp house churches have grown from nine fellowships to 31 fellowships, spread out in various camps and other locations.[146] Typically somewhere between 250 and 300 people gather weekly in homes or mosques around a simple inductive Bible study methodology. The groups remain divided along gender lines, with six of the fellowships attended by women only,[147] a new development over the past two years. One of the groups consists entirely of Muslim clerics.[148] The gatherings are overseen by a leadership group of eight,[149] who meet together weekly for their own worship and study. These men lead their own respective groups while also being responsible for other group leaders whom they visit regularly. Groups generally do not have contact with each other due to security concerns,[150] but information for prayer and encouragement is shared among the groups through the leadership network. This is also true of the women's groups which are run by the wife of a Muslim cleric.[151] These groups generally pass on their news through their husbands.

[146] Due to security Mohammad and Isa were understandably cautious. Mohammed: "The number of groups is now 31. They are not in one area."
[147] Mohammed: "We have six groups of women!"
[148] Interviewer: "And do you, this is just for information, before you had, you had groups that were meeting that were even clerics, do you still have that group, are they still meeting?" Mohammed: "Well, they are still."
[149] Mohammed: "We have a group, and the group it's called Friday Group and we meet on a regular basis. But all the members of the group are group leaders (laughs) so when I say 'group' I mean the group of 'the groups'."
[150] Mohammed: "…we meet with the leaders of the groups in other camps and in other areas...not all the believers. Because of security reasons."
[151] This cleric is part of the main leadership group.

Another new development has been the introduction of the Eucharist, usually taken weekly before the study begins, and celebrated regularly among most of the groups. The groups continue to baptize adherents who wish to perform that ritual[152] and collect a regular tithe for distribution among the poor. In addition to Bible study during their times together, the groups continue in prayer for one another and the wider society, include a time of sharing of personal needs and hold each other mutually accountable in respect to decisions made in response to the inductive study.

- The shape of community:

In the Camp Church it would be difficult to divorce community formation from mission. Not only are the gatherings a result of mission but are shaped in such a way that mission remains a foundational purpose for the groups to exist: a "first wave" mentality, or, as mentioned in the interviews, "the nucleus of salvation."[153] The churches coalesce around the belief held by at least half the attendees that the teachings of Jesus are holy, the gospels are authoritative and are to be obeyed, and the followers of Jesus have a special mission to the rest of the Palestinian community to convey these teachings.[154] They see themselves as a transformational community within the wider society. Having a shared missional vision held by many of the attendees would, one assumes, also be a unifying factor creating a distinction between those in the fellowship and those without. Mission affects where and how the groups meet, how leaders are chosen and developed, and the level of separation from society that the Camp Church maintains.

Community is being formed in the camps and, though highly contextualized, is given definition in a number of ways. One of these is through the practice of some simple rituals. Baptism has been performed from the early formation of the Camp Church[155] and continues to be administered by the group leaders to those who request it. Though it could be regarded as a community boundary marker (distinguishing those who are "in" from those who are not), it doesn't appear to be as strong a marker as other practices in the fellowship. If infant baptism were practiced that could lead to a stronger community definition but as adult baptism is not required for an adherent to attend a meeting, participate in church activities,[156] lead a group or celebrate the Eucharist, it symbolizes a decision for deeper commitment rather than a step to

[152] The Camp Churches practice adult baptism.
[153] See Muslim Voices in Context I, Camp Church Network, The fellowship's role in the wider community.
[154] Mohammad stated that at least half the attendees would subscribe to the missional vision that Mohammad and Isa outlined in the interview.
[155] See Muslim Voices in Context I, Camp Church Network, The group formation process.
[156] Organized efforts to reach out to poor Palestinians, for example.

join the church community.[157] The leaders in the group of eight[158] have all been baptized and though the qualifications for baptism never were raised in the interview (in contrast with other interviews in this study) it is conceivable that the process modeled by one of the original founders of the fellowship, Mohammed, is the one followed by all the groups. As recorded in the first interview, after several readings of the gospel narrative he decided personally, without urgings from the foreign missionaries, to emulate the first disciples and be baptized. His decision was an individual one and appears to be the pattern followed by the church.

When first interviewed, the church in the camps did not celebrate the Eucharist.[159] However, they have taken up the practice within the last two years. It is celebrated before the study and both Mohammed and Isa conveyed several significant values expressed through this ritual. Firstly, they felt it conveyed their sense of imitating Jesus and the disciples. Through the Eucharist they felt a connection with their New Testament roots as a fellowship and with the life and sufferings of Christ. In this time they believe they experience the presence of Christ together. Breaking bread was also an expression of their life together as a church as they shared good experiences as well as standing together in solidarity in suffering. It gave them, they said, a great sense of unity with each other and with Jesus and the apostles.

Although not a rigid community boundary marker as in other church expressions,[160] partaking of the Eucharist would certainly appear to be an element in building community, i.e. a motivator of unity and equality. The same could also be said for the group practice of tithing. Though voluntary, it does create a corporate sense of social responsibility as the offerings are used to help the poor, usually those outside of the fellowship. Other practices such as communal prayer, not only for individual concerns but also focused on wider societal issues,[161] as well as the opportunities for group outreaches to suffering Palestinians,[162] also appear to be building blocks for community.

The group practice, encouraged by the Discovery Bible Study methodology, of regular weekly meetings which give opportunities to share personal triumphs and struggles and for mutual

[157] Compare this to the role that baptism plays in the ex-Muslim fellowship of Kitma as described by Duane Miller. Baptism is regarded as the "assimilation or incorporation of the believer into the congregation." Miller, "Living Among the Breakage," 146.
[158] This is the core leadership team that meets on Friday evenings.
[159] It is not clear what brought about this change. When the interviewees were questioned in the first interview about the "Lord's Supper," they stated that they did not celebrate the ritual. However, at the time of the first interview I witnessed Mohammad and Isa remarking to each other that breaking bread sounded like a good idea. One has to wonder whether the asking of that question in the first interview planted the seed which then led to celebrating the Eucharist at a later date.
[160] Examples of this are the various denominations, including the Orthodox Church, where the Eucharist is only administered to baptized members of the Orthodox faith.
[161] See Muslim Voices in Context I, Camp Church Network, Other influences.
[162] See Muslim Voices in Context I, Camp Church Network, The fellowship's role in the wider community.

accountability, could be seen as also aiding this communal spirit. Certainly one would imagine an environment where each participant (including the leader) is asked sincerely, "What are you thankful for, what's bothering you, and how can we help?" as being conducive to deepening genuine relationships and commitment to one another. Another powerful practice found among the "followers of Isa (Jesus)" is the sharing of personal convictions. After each study everyone present shares publicly an intentional act that he or she will undertake in response to the reading and studying of the Scripture passage for that week.[163] The expectation is that each participant is held accountable to the rest of the group and that he or she will act upon their intentions. Part of the time in the meeting the following week is spent reporting on what actually happened. If a participant has not followed through on what he or she stated they would do, they have to give a reason why this was not done. One can imagine how this voluntary submission to one another, expressed through a time of mutual accountability, the sharing of the highs and lows of life coupled with genuine offers (and acts) of help, and the sincere prayers for each other would be key factors in building vibrant community in the Palestinian camps.

One could assume that there would be a tendency to lose cohesiveness or community definition in a group that appears from the outside to have weak boundary markers, at least religiously. Yet the camp fellowships seem to remain quite cohesive and defined. Certainly some of this would be due to organization (e.g. regular weekly meetings) but more telling is the strong relational connection that the fellowships seem to display. From the initial invitation to join a small, intimate meeting to the consistent, structured times of fellowship and the practice of mutual accountability, even among the leadership, the camp fellowships exhibit the high value that is placed on open, trusting relationships. As these relationships are reinforced by the regular group practices already mentioned, the strength to resist the slide toward dissipating and disappearing into the wider society has been built into the house churches. The notion that these are the people one shares openly with and who hold an adherent to his/her word can be a powerful cohesive force. In addition, this relational dynamic also appears to have, up to now,

[163] The Discovery Bible Study methodology terms this the "I will statements." In my personal observation and from the reporting of other group leaders, "I will statements" can be as widely varied as "I will spend 1 hour in prayer this week" to "I will not get drunk this week" or "I will not beat my wife." In the interview, Mohammad and Isa told an anecdote of one group leader sharing after the study of his personal conviction that he must be reconciled with his cousin who had cheated him and still owed him money. He went that week, spoke with his cousin, and then kissed him on the top of his head to symbolize "all is forgiven." He then shared this experience with the rest of the group the following week. I regard this story as significant as it demonstrates the level of trust displayed as the leader shares, with those not of his family, about an internal family dispute and his response to it, not only after a solution was found but also before he went to speak with his cousin, that is, while the dispute was still ongoing. By doing that he invited the rest of the group to hold him accountable to his intention to reconcile. In my experience these matters are rarely discussed outside of the family except perhaps with the closest of friends, thus possibly indicating the depth of relationship found in that particular group at least.

saved the fellowships from reducing their communities to mere meetings or programs. It should be noted that the above description would pertain to many small groups, religious or otherwise.

Groups can also coalesce around shared convictions. As previously mentioned, at least half the attendees believe that the teachings of Jesus are holy, authoritative, and are to be obeyed. They also regard themselves as a group that has a special mission to the rest of the Palestinian community to convey these teachings.[164] They see themselves as a transformational community within the wider society. Having a shared missional vision held by many of the attendees would, one assumes, also be a unifying factor creating a distinction between those in the fellowship and those without. A joint sense of purpose would be a great strength.

The camp fellowships appear not to practice an extensive "insider" or "outsider" vocabulary[165] as an aid to distinguish who is "in" and who is "out." One of the patterns of mission that they have created is that they are a community of faith within a larger socio-religious grouping[166] and this is reflected in their retention of Islamic religious language to express their faith convictions.[167] In one sense they would like to communicate that there is no "in" or "out" and that their community is the transformative "nucleus of salvation" bringing change not from the outside but from within. However, despite this thinking there is a distinct community boundary marker that can be observed from the interviews. It would appear that the process in which an interested person is vetted and gains admittance into the house churches, as described earlier in this chapter, is a method of defining the community to a certain extent. Unlike other expressions of faith where one agrees to a confession of faith (as in Islam) or to perform a ritual (like baptism), being invited to the meeting seems dependent upon a favorable character appraisal by the leadership and, if one is a sincere inquirer who is also trustworthy, then the door is open.

Another area that could help toward community definition is the establishment of their own unique leadership structure, particularly one that is as integrated as the Camp Churches' structure. Apart from the core leadership group of eight that meets regularly after Friday evening prayers, there exists a network of home group leaders who are supervised by the core team. From the interviews it can be surmised that while some of these home groups are led by a spiritual elder type person, others appeared to be organized by a facilitator with no strong expression of church leadership. Perhaps this is reflective of the significant place that mission holds in the thinking of the interviewees and which appears to be demonstrated in the way that

[164] Mohammad stated that at least half the attendees would subscribe to the missional vision that Mohammad and Isa outlined in the interview.
[165] See Meeks, *Urban Christians*, 93-96.
[166] I.e. Palestinian Sunni.
[167] E.g. the Qur'anic term "Isa" for Jesus rather than the commonly used Christian term "Jesu'" which is found in most Arabic translations of the New Testament.

they tackle the leadership issue. A major concern voiced in the interview was the raising up and appointment of new leaders as a means of addressing the pressure on the core leadership team caused by the rapid addition of new members. New leaders are chosen after a time of prayerful listening resulting in a consensus that this person is the one that God has identified. When asked if there were any criteria qualifying people for leadership Mohammed and Isa answered that they did not believe that there was anything specific. Yet as the interview progressed it became clear that they looked for leaders who were people of character, possessed gravitas, wisdom, charisma, ability, and were ready to learn from the core leadership and teach others.

One significant area of omission as they selected leaders, however, was that of faith. It also became clear over the course of the interview that "believers" not "followers" led three of the house groups.[168] When asked to distinguish between these two descriptions, it was communicated that "followers" were ones that lived out the teachings of Jesus as opposed to just acknowledging belief in Christ.[169] In this appointment of non-followers as group leaders we see the genuine concern for community formation[170] become subservient for a time to the ever-present demand of mission. Unlike other emerging fellowships among Muslims in the Near East that would restrict growth or mission if suitable leadership were not found,[171] the Camp Church leaders allow groups to meet with, by their standards, inadequate leadership so that the momentum of mission will continue. The structure of the Discovery Bible Study methodology (DBS) does gives space to being led (or facilitated) on occasion by someone who holds to the same level of faith convictions and Scripture engagement as the rest of the group, as opposed to the more traditional elder/pastor model of the more knowledgeable and mature leading the less mature. This methodology does aid the Camp Church in its mission practice.

Mohammed and Isa communicate that developing more leaders is a major focus of the Camp Churches at this time. Training on the qualities of a good leader is being given to all the group leaders through one-on-one visits by the group of eight. They reported that there is a strong emphasis on teaching through the sharing of personal experience. The group of eight, who function as elders or overseers, are committed to developing a strong personal relationship with the leaders for whom they are responsible, encouraging them, praying for their needs and with them in their difficulties. Through their personal visits they are able to observe how the group leaders are doing and pass on new material for teaching to the groups. The group leaders are also committed to developing leaders and are proactively looking for opportunities to allow

[168] Mohammad: "And they are believers, not followers. See, and they are leaders of groups."
[169] Mohammad: "They just believe in Jesus, they believe in Jesus but they are not, well, followers 100%. They are not followers 100%."
[170] See Muslim Voices in Context I, Camp Church Network, Leadership.
[171] See Muslim Voices in Context II, Mountain Church. The Mountain Church has not adopted DBS as widely as the Camp Churches. That is, in consequence, a contributing factor to its community shape.

those in the group to take a leadership role. Each adherent would have an opportunity to facilitate the weekly meeting on a regular basis.

Upon reflection, observing the level of personal investment within the leadership, one would expect a significant sense of community and unity within that leadership structure. This coupled with the sharing, praying, and mutual accountability within the structure leads one to comprehend something of the sense of strong community and group cohesion that Mohammed and Isa enthusiastically communicate when they describe the camp fellowships. One could anticipate that this level of cohesion would be critical for such a highly contextualized community seeking to remain fully integrated in society while simultaneously professing a radically different faith confession from that society, with different life values.

The use of the term “follower” as a descriptive of some adherents, and “believer” to describe others, certainly is reflective of the high value that obedience has in the Camp Church, encouraged no doubt by the strong obedience and accountability emphasis in the DBS methodology. It also reveals a certain categorization, at least from the leadership standpoint, within the fellowships, though how much of that distinction is understood or felt by the ordinary adherent is not clear from the interviews. It would appear that genuine inquirers of good character, who are trustworthy, once passing the vetting process, are warmly accepted into a particular group. As the groups never mix, the average attendee, once finding acceptance, would continue in those relationships, with the number of relationships increasing if he started his own group. The leadership, however, would have the hope that the attendee would move from being an inquirer to being a believer to being a follower. Followers, it seems, are more likely to participate in group ministry to the poor, be active in communal prayer and giving, and will possibly start and lead their own groups.

Although the Camp Church has created, from all their accounts, a strong and somewhat distinct community, they still seek to remain within Palestinian Sunni society, not as outliers on the fringe but as fully integrated members within the wider community. This has come at the cost of their community ideals in a number of instances. Certainly the most obvious is the separation of men and women (and by implication children) for worship. This is in line with the strict separation of the sexes in Palestinian Sunni society and also in line with the accepted Islamic expressions of worship found in the camps where the women (and girls) are generally expected to pray at home on most occasions. Though Mohammed freely admits that this is far from ideal and a hindrance to the building of community that they are striving for, he also sees no practical alternative if the groups are to remain viable within their context.

He states:

> Well…unfortunately it's not right, it's not fair to abide by that kind of social norm, but we have to. And you know…it makes it easier for the people to get involved. And we cannot, as I told you, we cannot break the rule. We cannot break this rule. Although without it things could be different, more positive.

If they begin to hold mixed gender meetings those meetings would most probably be regarded as so inappropriate that the "followers of Isa" would probably be considered pariahs by society. The opportunity to relationally connect and share their faith convictions with more people will have been lost. In this instance it again appears mission takes precedence over community.

A remarkable feature of the Camp Church is not only its ability to survive as a cohesive unit but to go beyond that and flourish in a potentially hostile environment. How is it able to achieve that when the members continue to remain an integral part of society, sharing in its feasts, religious celebrations, and, in some cases, religious rites? It could be argued that they continue to survive because they have so contextualized or compromised their beliefs to conform to society that they live largely unnoticed. This is certainly a criticism leveled at other similar movements found in the Middle East and North Africa.[172] However, this critique seems to falter, at least in this instance, in the face of the evidence revealed in the interviews. The reports of ostracism and persecution suffered by the Camp Church would certainly indicate a certain degree of distinctiveness, at least in a number of the Camp Church's more prominent individuals, from the general Palestinian Sunni population in which it exists. On the other hand, one could surmise that the Camp Churches have been able to not only survive but grow and mature because they have managed to so contextualize the tenets of the Christian faith that they are regarded as "unorthodox" within the space that Sunni Islam affords, rather than "foreign." Hence the followers of Isa may be regarded with suspicion by some for deviating from traditional Islam but are not anathematized by the community as a whole for giving allegiance to the beliefs of another religion. If there is a perceived threat it is an issue within the community rather than an attack from the outside. Interestingly, it appears that the Camp Church is able to answer their critics as to the veracity of their beliefs by reformed lifestyles closer to the ideal held by the community.[173] Most importantly, this debate is kept within the camp as an inside issue.

- Patterns of mission:

After two years, the patterns of mission praxis in the Camp Church have remained generally the same. Foundationally most, if not all, of the members of the Camp Church fellowships continue to share their own personal faith journey with their network of family, neighbors, and friends.

[172] L. D. Waterman, "Do the Roots Affect the Fruits?" *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24, no. 2 (2007): 57-63.

[173] E.g. Honesty, integrity, respect for parents, kindness, etc. See Muslim Voices in Context I, Camp Church Network interviews.

Unlike other church models that would lean toward being programmatic (e.g. an inquirer is invited to an event in the church building), their personal "sharing" flows along the lines of trust and allows opportunity for open discussion, fuller explanations, and engagement with the inquirers' objections, questions, and curiosity. This, coupled with the continued collective outreach to poor Palestinian families described in the previous round of interviews, gives this localized expression of mission its shape. It also continues to be communicated in language and forms highly contextualized to the dominant Palestinian Sunni Muslim environment found in the refugee camps.

After the initial round of interviews, which firstly explored what was happening in the camps and secondly explored the major factors that influenced the development of the fellowships, an exploration was also made of New Testament scholarship in an attempt to elicit a description of mission patterns found in the early churches. This exercise was guided in part by the issues facing the new emerging fellowships both in the camps and other regions in the Near East. In turn, observations made regarding how the early church coped with these issues inspired the questions of the second round of interviews. Interesting parallels were discovered between the early churches and the churches in the camps.

As one might expect, the growth experienced in the camp fellowships over the past two years was welcomed with joy and excitement by the interviewees. This is in line with the perception Mohammed and Isa hold that the fellowships are the "nucleus of salvation" for the entire Palestinian people. This missional vision is not just owned by the two interviewees or even just the core leaders but, as recorded in the interview, is embraced by over half of the attendees in the groups. This belief is expressed by adherents actively speaking about their faith convictions not just at home but also at work, the mosque, and other more public places. Mohammed and Isa were particularly encouraged by the number of adult baptisms that were performed over that period, indicative, it would seem, of their belief regarding this ritual. Though rituals will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter, baptism is regarded by the Camp Church as a significant expression of faith in and commitment to the person and teachings of Christ.

It is of particular interest to this study that after two years the Camp Church is still holding to its conviction that they are "followers of Isa" within the Palestinian Muslim community. They are convinced that their calling is to remain within society to continue testifying to their new faith convictions. Of equal significance is the fact that the wider Palestinian community has allowed these fellowships to continue to exist. Though not without their concerns, it would appear that the "followers of Isa" have still retained their relationships and positions within their families and the wider society. Mohammed shared in the interview that this is an achievement of which he is quite proud and he is obviously delighted to be able to communicate to family and friends

that they have not betrayed the Palestinian community. “We accepted Jesus but we are still your friends, neighbors, and relatives,” he declares. Even the religious clerics who are following the teachings of Christ have remained as leaders of mosques and use their positions, both religious and political, to share the teachings of Christ. “To be Jesus followers doesn’t mean they have to stop being sheikhs!” states Mohammed clearly, indicating that he sees no conflict of interest in heading a mosque and being a “follower of Isa.”

From their position as community insiders one has the sense that the Camp Church is infusing the traditions and daily life of the Palestinian camps with their faith beliefs. They share in all the numerous religious and secular holidays, with *Eid al-Adha,*[174] *Yawm an-Nakba*[175] and *Yawm al-Ard*[176] being particular opportunities for the Camp Church to share something of the teachings of Jesus with those attending mosques or political rallies. The clerics continue to be called upon to deliver speeches at some of these rallies, a subject for concerted prayer by the church, with controversial results similar to the previous reporting. These speeches are centered on the themes of peace and reconciliation rather than making the usual calls for violence and revenge. Interestingly, despite the seemingly contentious reaction to subjects out of step with the rest of the rally, these clerics are still regularly invited to participate. This seems to be an excellent example of the creative tension that arises out of adhering to the teaching of Christ within a Palestinian Sunni context. As part of the Sunni community these followers of Jesus are happy to participate in *Eid al-Adha* but actively seek to use the aborted sacrifice of Abraham’s son as a pointer to the sacrifice of Christ. As Palestinians they stand in solidarity with the rest of their community as it commemorates *Yawm an-Nakba* and join in its call for justice, yet point to the teachings of Christ as containing the more appropriate community response.[177]

Certainly, the effectiveness of engaging a society that the Camp Church adherents understand very well cannot be overestimated. As insiders, the proclamation of their faith convictions up to the time of writing has not been perceived as a presentation of a “foreign gospel.” This must be regarded as advantageous in a context where the concept of foreign is not “exotic and interesting” but rather “alien and threatening.” In addition, the practice of adopting, somewhat intuitively, customs, commemorations, and religious feasts and infusing these events with interpretations and symbolism that would point to the Camp Churches’ core message or using them as an opportunity to engage critical issues (e.g. Land Day) from a different perspective

[174] Translation: *feast of sacrifice*. A religious Muslim observance which commemorates the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son.
[175] Translation: *day of catastrophe.* An annual commemoration of the Palestinian exodus from Palestine in 1948.
[176] Translation: *land day.* An annual commemoration of the events that transpired in Arab towns from the Galilee to the Negev on March 30, 1976.
[177] For a more detailed treatise on Palestinian identity, their struggle, and the significance of land, see Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), Kindle edition, introduction to 2010 re-issue.

shows a robust missional praxis. This praxis clearly does not shrink from publicly tackling societal ills such as hatred for the Jews, or from sacrificially giving to the poor from their own resources. Again, these are issues with which they are well acquainted as insiders. That this pattern of courageous and costly mission is inspired from their active study of the life and teachings of Christ as seen in the New Testament only adds to its strength, as a common warrant for authority is established among the different house churches.

This positive community engagement from the Camp Church finds its roots in an intentional and focused study of the *Injil.*[178] According to Mohammed and Isa, all the groups participate in New Testament studies related to issues arising out of the enmity between Palestinians and Jews. Time is also spent reflecting on the redemptive analogies found in the sacrifice story of Abraham. In addition, another contributing factor to attitudes and opinions out of step with the rest of society is the group practice of what they term "strategic prayer." Here group members will gather in corporate prayer to ask God to replace "the hatred in the hearts of the (community) leaders with love toward the Jews" or to seek God to bring about reconciliation between the Lebanese and Palestinian communities. The interviewees clearly expressed their belief shared with the rest of the Camp Church that "strategic prayer" is effective in obtaining a favorable response from God. They are convinced that he will hear and answer these appeals to transform their society.

A position of compassion and forgiveness toward one's enemies, particularly those that are perceived to have attacked the community as a whole, can conceivably place one at odds with society. Mohammed and Isa spoke of the changed lifestyle of the "followers of Isa" as being one of the most significant forms of mission witness to family, friends, and neighbors as they continue to share the impact that the person, life, and teachings of Jesus has had on them personally. As they described what this changed lifestyle looked like, i.e. more caring and attentive toward family and neighbors, generous and compassionate toward poor Palestinians, etc.,[179] one could imagine that they were describing someone who was perceived to be "good" or "righteous" in any community, whether Christian or Muslim. Although these virtues were honorable and praiseworthy, they were not necessarily distinct enough to be countercultural and only gave credence to the opinion held by some, that the "followers of Isa" were good people. However, in the area of loving one's enemy the Camp Churches display a very distinct attitude and belief that has created suspicion and opposition in some, while simultaneously intriguing others.

[178] Literally the gospels contained in the New Testament but often used interchangeably with the term *ahad al-jdeed* (New Testament).
[179] See Muslim Voices in Context I, Camp Church Network, The fellowship's role in the wider community.

The Camp Church does experience some opposition and this opposition has tempered the patterns of mission to a certain extent. In the interview Mohammed and Isa stated that they did not share with everyone but rather "share wisely."[180] They must be sharing widely enough, however, to evoke some opposition and certainly their stories of openly sharing their faith beliefs with those with whom they have a relationship (family, friends, colleagues, and the poor) would seem to reinforce this assumption. If the Camp Church is to some extent overt in their verbal witness to their faith beliefs in Christ as well as in their relief efforts among poor Palestinians, they maintain a rather more covert stance when it comes to the organization of the house churches. People are invited to the meetings only after a relationship has been established and they have been vetted by the group leader, usually after meeting with him or her several times. If the leader "has a sense from God that they should be welcomed" then that interested person would visit the group with the group leader. After that visit the group discusses among themselves the potential future attendance of this person and, if the group agrees, then an invitation is extended to the newcomer to attend more regularly. This process would generally happen within the network of relationships (extended family, friends, colleagues, etc.) in which each group member functions. The missional work among the poor, however, extends that network to include relationships that would not naturally occur, though all networks are contained within the Palestinian Muslim community. Contact between the groups is severely limited (or sometimes nonexistent) and even contact between the group leaders is undertaken quietly and in places not associated with the camps. How this affects community living will be discussed later in this section but the need for this caution does temper the patterns of mission of the Camp Church. The attractional model of church,[181] seen so often in more open contexts,[182] is perceived as too dangerous in the camps and in consequence the possibility of genuine inquirers experiencing the close fellowship and commitment to one another that Mohammed and Isa report is severely curtailed. This caution is also extended to mixing with people from the traditional Christian community. As Isa states:

> If I say I am a Christian or if people see that I have friends that are Christians, people are going to think that I'm a Christian. One time Mohammed and I went to visit somebody and that person's neighbor knew us and he asked us, "Have you become Christian?"

[180] Mohammed: "This makes it easier for…people to approach us. Because we weren't Christians. So it makes it easier for us to share with people about Jesus wisely, to share wisely with people, because we cannot share with (just) anyone."

[181] A public gathering of Christians which anyone can attend, typically with programs for youth, children, women, etc., that would also attract the surrounding community. See Andrea Gray, Leith Gray, Bob Fish, and Michael Baker, "Networks of Redemption: A Preliminary Statistical Analysis of Fruitfulness in Transformational and Attractional Approaches," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 27, no. 2 (2010): 89-95.

[182] E.g. the City Church.

It is obvious from this statement that being perceived as a Christian (and by implication someone who is of the Christian community) is not a positive identifier.

But the caution displayed in the Camp Churches is not a result of fear or of an unwillingness to suffer. In fact, according to the interviewees, most of the "followers of Isa," particularly the mature, have suffered and are ready to suffer more. They draw inspiration from the sufferings of Christ and the apostles as recorded in the New Testament and fully expect that this also is their lot in life.

Mohammed states:

> ...the leaders of the groups and mostly all the members of the groups…have in mind the idea that they might be persecuted at any time (for the sake of) the name of Jesus. Because we all read about Jesus and what happened with Jesus.

The more mature among the followers, by their teaching and examples of perseverance under trial, help the younger, newer members to take this attitude also. It would appear that the restraints placed upon their mission activities are a result of balancing boldness with wisdom, a clear speaking of faith convictions measured against the necessity of survival in a potentially hostile environment.

Summary

In summary, after giving an update on new growth, the leaders discussed the embracing by most adherents of the missional vision of the church network and the way that is expressed in their everyday lives. They also spoke of the opposition that they have faced because of their missional posture. Intriguingly, Mohammed and Isa also spoke of the way in which the church network remains totally integrated not only in their society but also in their religion, and the perceived impact that this has on their mission.

Related to the above but from another perspective they also spoke of the present shape of their community and how it had been influenced by the church's missional vision. They shared of the pressure to develop more leaders and how that has helped in defining their community, the distinction they made between "believers" and "followers" and how remaining heavily embedded in society shapes the way they express themselves as a community. Other interesting factors are the use of ritual and the restrictions placed upon inquirers looking to join the network. These issues will be further discussed in the following section as themes common to the five churches are examined.

Common Themes from the Second Round of Interviews

One interesting observation that can be made from the second round of interviews is how little has changed in the structure of each of the fellowships over the four-year gap between the two interview sessions. There have been some obvious changes in worship practices, methods of witness and, for three of the fellowships, in numbers, which will be discussed below, but the fundamental structure or shape of the fellowships has remained constant.

The Mountain Churches

The Mountain Church continues to meet in a school accessible to the general public, and its incremental growth has been offset by a split where a number of families left the church. The majority of adherents remain Druze and still maintain the same posture toward the religion of their birth. Basically, they reject the Druze religion because of their new faith convictions but they continue to identify themselves as Druze and remain in the Druze community.

The church has adopted the societal structure of a clan, complete with patriarchal leadership, and has created a community where men and women interact freely and honorably. As a pattern of worship they have borrowed heavily from traditional evangelical churches that are present in the city. The other Mountain Church appears to function in a very similar way.

The City Church Community

The City Church has experienced significant growth over the past four years, increasing to a large number of attendees and to around 18 to 20 meetings a week. A new development has been the emergence of a Kurdish language fellowship that began meeting in the center where the City Church community gathers. The core group of attendees at the center, those that have made a public confession of their exclusive belief in the person of Christ, continues to maintain their attitude toward Islam and their culture. That posture is that they continue to reject Islam because of their faith convictions and want to be identified as Christian.

The City Church still sees itself as a halfway house for Muslims to first come and then be integrated into evangelical churches in the city. Despite this, however, it is clear that they are still forming community and are quite active in mission. The shape of their community could be seen as something similar to a village community center where people can come and go and spend time socializing even if there is not a specific meeting being held at that time. The pattern of worship is influenced by the adoption of the worship forms practiced by evangelical churches in the city.

The Village Church Network

The Village Church network has also grown significantly, adding not only groups but also a number of Sunni Muslim churches to their Shiite network.[183] Their attitude toward Islam has also remained the same. They continue to reject Islam because of their new faith convictions. However, they also continue to identify themselves as Shiites or Sunnis and remain in their birth communities. The groups have formed exclusively around the culturally recognizable form of a household unit, primarily as relatives of both sexes meeting together, and have added DBS as a pattern of worship and study.

The Camp Church Network

The Camp Church network remains a network of house churches that meets in homes in a refugee camp. This network has grown from nine home fellowships to thirty-one.[184] Their attitude toward their culture and Sunni Islam remains the same. They do not reject Islam but rather seek to redefine at least some Islamic rituals and traditions within the framework of their new faith convictions. They want to remain Muslim and continue to live in their respective communities.

The Camp Church network has quite naturally adopted a culturally accepted structure, similar to a Qur'anic study, of a single gender meeting in a home or mosque where a sacred text is studied and discussed. To this form they have adapted the Discovery Bible Study (DBS) methodology as a simple pattern for their worship that adds prayer and mutual confession to their Scripture study and discussion. This is an apparent melding of a local and foreign structure.

The Patterns of Mission

Relational witness

There are a number of common missional traits among the five churches surveyed. They are all highly relational (face-to-face) and informal, generally using their existing social networks, like family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues, etc., to communicate the adherents' faith convictions. Between the period of the two rounds of interviews, the City Church has transitioned from having a strong emphasis on evangelistic programs to more of an informal relational expression.

Changed lives

All of the interviewees identified the powerful affirmation that consistent, changed behavior gave to their witness as they communicated their faith convictions to those around them. This

[183] In a telephone conversation with Mahboub in November 2016, he reported that the number of adherents was around 200.

[184] In conversation with Dexter he reported that the number of fellowships has since grown to 60 in 2016.

has been a factor in the leading of many others in their various social circles to also lay hold of those same faith convictions.

Missional vision embraced by the majority
It is worthy of note that a common trait among all the churches was a strong conviction held by most adherents that it was their personal responsibility to be regularly sharing the gospel message that they previously received. This also was highlighted in the first round of interviews and still appears as a core conviction after four years. The missional vision also speaks to the sense of calling and purpose that many attendees have regarding themselves in relation to the society around them.

Mission as an expression of self-understanding
Another area of commonality among the churches was not only a strong acceptance of a missionary vision by the majority but also a conviction that this missionary vision was related to who they have become now that they have accepted the faith claims of Christ. Mission was a natural outcome of this new lifestyle that they had adopted as individuals. As mentioned below, three of the churches also had a clear corporate identity as a called people who have a particular responsibility to propagate the gospel message of Christ to the rest of their community.

Willingness to suffer
Another common theme, revealed also in the first round of interviews, was the place that suffering had in the lives of the adherents. All endure some kind of suffering, many in the extreme, as is the case in the Village Church network, and accept it as a normal part of life that one has to bear. If it can be avoided then it is permissible to do so but life does involve suffering. They did not appear to have a theology that suggested that suffering was either something that shouldn't happen to a Christ-follower or is always a direct result of sin.[185] Suffering for being a Christ-follower was accepted and expected and was also the experience of many adherents in all of the fellowships. Patient endurance of suffering for the sake of believing in the faith claims of Christ was seen as a mark of maturity and an example to younger believers.

The Shape of Community

Establishing boundaries
With a strong commitment to personal relationships within the group, the different churches and networks did form boundaries between themselves and the rest of the society that in turn gave shape to their community. This was often through the use of insider/outsider language

[185] See, as an example, Oral Roberts, *God's Formula for Success and Prosperity* (Gary: Abundant Life Publications, 1966).

(including familial language) with those inside the group to create distinctions between them and the wider society (including extended family). They also practiced their own rituals (baptism and the Eucharist), established their own authority structure, and met regularly as a distinct group. This was coupled with consistent social interaction between themselves outside of regular meetings. Also evident in all the interviews was an expectation by the group of upright or honorable behavior consistent with the teachings of Christ that they were studying.

A called community

Another common theme arising from the interviews was the sense of missional calling mentioned in the previous section. This missional call, embraced by the majority of adherents, also added to the adherents' sense of being special or distinct from the rest of society. They see themselves as having a specific role to play, particularly in relation to their own people, that of bringing the "good news" of Christ's teachings and message to the rest of their people. Their vision is that many others will, like them, embrace this message. This in turn adds to the community's sense of distinctiveness in comparison to the rest of society, further adding to the community's shape.

Summary

After a period of three or four years (depending on the church interviewed), the second round of seven interviews was conducted. The interviews, based on the questions formulated from the survey in the section Early Church Voices, revolved around community formation issues, missional patterns as churches, and each emerging faith community's self-description. As each interview was analyzed (using Descriptive, Structural, and V. A. B.[186] coding), common themes were identified and summarized. Of note is the position that each church took regarding the religion of the community from which they emerged. Though varied in their response, from the City Church's "*In the light of our new faith we reject Islam and want to be identified as Christian,"* to the Camp Church network's "*We don't reject Islam in its entirety, rather we redefine aspects of Islam in the light of our new faith. We want to remain Muslim and continue to live in our communities,*" it is perhaps unsurprising that every new and emerging faith community had a position articulated by the leadership that each adherent was expected to adopt. Naturally it would seem that each church's missional posture was strongly influenced by this adopted position, particularly as these missional expressions were all highly relational. Perhaps in common with all new movements, the missional vision and praxis were embraced by

[186] Values, attitudes, and beliefs. See section Methodology, Implementation.

the majority of the adherents.[187] Significant also was a common attitude of acceptance toward suffering that each of the churches held and taught.

Adopting a recognizable, pre-existing societal structure as an aid to expressing their community was also a common occurrence. With established boundaries of language, ritual, and relational commitment that helped define the community, it was clear that these common traits helped each church in significantly different contexts continue to not only exist but often to flourish. These findings form the basis for the discussion in the section entitled, "Conversations Between Muslim Voices in Context and the Early Church Movement."

[187] Rodney Stark, "Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 11, no. 2 (1996): 133-146.

Conversations Between Muslim Voices in Context and the Early Church Movement

Introduction

This section continues the conversation begun in “Muslim Voices in Context I” by bringing the common themes and questions from the five new emerging fellowships into comparison and critical discussion with a description of the early church movement. Beginning first with a section entitled “Similarities to Affirm,” comparisons are made between the church contexts and helpful similarities are observed. The two contexts share a certain degree of commonality with regard to worship practices, a distinct lifestyle, and an embracing of a missional vision that led to a sharing of faith convictions with those outside of the fellowship. Other similarities were the response to enemies, both personal and communal, the attitude toward suffering, and the formation of community. Where there were major areas of possible difference between the two contexts, critical conversations were held discussing the danger of isolationism, the adaptation or adoption of societal models of community, and models of leadership.

Similarities to Affirm

There are a number of striking similarities between the new churches and the early church movement. All the churches that have emerged from the Muslim and Druze communities share elements of worship in common with the early churches in the apostolic age. Reading and teaching from the Scriptures, communal prayer, and, in many of the groups, some form of worship, either singing or reading Psalms (as in the case of the Camp Church network) were all common elements. The sacraments were also practiced in all the churches and networks.

Another obvious parallel between the new churches and the early church movement is the way the commands of Christ were lived out in regard to the church and to the wider community. In the interviews, examples were given of changed behavior as husbands stopped beating wives and others sought reconciliation with estranged family members. In the Camp Church network Mohammed and Isa also spoke of the relief work done for the poor and for Palestinian refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war. Generally, all in the wider Muslim community view these actions as admirable. Mohammed states that the Camp Churches engage in this distinct, commendable behavior because they are motivated by their self-understanding that they are "followers of Isa,” a sentiment echoed in the other church leader interviews.[1] Similarly, Paul urged the early churches to comparable exemplary behavior. As noted previously, this may have been driven by

[1] See section Muslim Voices I, Interview Analysis.

the apostle's concept of what he saw as the true nature of the church.[2] Bosch believed that they were compelled to act in an exemplary way due to their self-understanding as people who were "saints" and "elect" and "called" by God.[3]

Despite the high regard that the wider community held for the new contemporary churches' stand on inter-personal/family relations, a major area of tension for three of the churches arises out of the extending of forgiveness toward the community's enemies. As mentioned previously, to forgive the enemies of the community is often perceived as a betrayal of that community. This love for enemies would appear to be, however, a strongly held conviction among the adherents of all the new churches. In the first and second interview sessions, Mohammed and Isa told of dedicated study of the teachings of Christ concerning one's enemies, times of communal "strategic prayer" against inter-ethnic hatred, and proclamation of peace and reconciliation (even with Israelis) at public events. Mohammed regards what he perceives as an escalation in enmity toward Israel with grave concern.[4] Mahboub of the Village Church network relates how one attendee of a fellowship was asked not to attend anymore because of his refusal to lay aside his desire for revenge on the enemies of his people group.[5]

In "Early Church Voices" we observed that Klassen believes the New Testament definition of "enemy" broadly encompasses not only those with whom one has a personal relationship but also religious and national enemies. Grasping the command to "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44) happens, he proposes, when one's life as a Christian is regarded as an ongoing extension of Christ's reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19).[6] The manner in which the new churches seek to obey these particular teachings of Christ would seem to echo Klassen's New Testament observations, desiring reconciliation as "followers of Jesus" with not only personal but also national enemies. Schnabel sees Paul's focus on love for one's enemies in Romans 12:19-21 as a non-negotiable element for viable mission and evangelism.[7] The apostle's teaching on loving one's enemies (who sometimes are a result of mission) and overcoming evil with good (a reference to Romans 12:21) particularly resonates with the testimony of the Camp Churches. Not only are they continuing to endure patiently and bless the enemies that persecute them, as detailed in the section on suffering, but they are taking the opportunity to preach reconciliation with the enemy as taught by Christ.

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[2] See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 1, 535.
[3] See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem. Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 139.
[4] Mohammad: "Strategic prayers that all Palestinians and those who are the top guys of the political parties, that God will replace the hatred in their hearts with love. Because we really need it. Because every year at this time people are injected with more and more hatred toward the Jews."
[5] See section Muslim Voices in Context II, Village Church.
[6] See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem. Klassen, "Love your Enemy," 147-171.
[7] See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 142.

For the Camp Church network, the bold step to incorporate these teachings in personal witness and official public speeches appears to be connected to their missional vision and desire to see their movement as one that communicates their message within the framework of Islam and within their context in the camps. As previously reported, the interviews describe what happened after one of the speeches given by a Muslim cleric from the Camp Church. He experienced much criticism, opposition, and even persecution as a result of his speech, but also started a number of groups as inquirers came in secret to explore the teachings of Christ further.[8] The Camp Church clerics continue to avail themselves of the opportunity to weave Christ's message of reconciliation into their public speeches. Remarkably, they continue to be asked to deliver these public speeches at significant community events. Similarly, though perhaps in not so public a fashion, the other new churches continue to stress this teaching of Christ to their adherents.[9]

Another similarity is the attitude to suffering shared between the two contexts. Both church situations, ancient and contemporary, faced antagonism, rejection, and, in some cases, physical abuse from the wider society.[10] In the interview with the Camp Church network leaders, Mohammad describes the situations of some from the fellowships who have suffered. He makes it clear that they see Christ as an example to emulate and as a leader to follow. If the leader suffers, then his followers will also suffer.[11] Schnabel highlights this same patient acceptance of suffering for Christ's sake and for the gospel (Mark 8:35, 10:29) as a clear posture also of the early churches. They were to face opposition, he says, with endurance, a denial of the desire for revenge, and prayer for their persecutors.[12] Again, the parallels with the new churches, particularly in the areas of patient endurance[13] and prayers for enemies, are striking.[14]

In common with the early churches is the expectation that each individual member of the new fellowships be an active witness.[15] All of the new churches reported a large number of their adherents sharing about their belief in Christ.[16] It would appear that for all the churches

[8] See section Muslim Voices I, Interview Analysis.
[9] See section Muslim Voices II, Mountain Church.
[10] See sections Muslim Voices II: Mountain Church, second Mountain Church, City Church, Village Church.
[11] See section Muslim Voices II, Camp Church. Mohammad: "The leaders of the groups and mostly all the members of the groups…have in mind the idea that they might be persecuted at any time (for the sake of)…the name of Jesus. Because we all read about Jesus and what happened with Jesus."
[12] See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 2*,* 1536-1537. See also Dunn, *Beginning,* 1162, and Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity*, 190.
[13] Isa: "We also see that Isa al Masih sacrificed himself for the world and he suffered for us and he was the ram of redemption (author's note: a reference to Genesis 22) for us and we need to sacrifice as he sacrificed. We need to sacrifice ourselves in the same manner found in the gospel."
[14] See sections Muslim Voices II: Mountain Church, second Mountain Church, City Church, Village Church.
[15] See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem.
[16] See sections Muslim Voices II: Mountain Church, second Mountain Church, City Church, Village Church, Camp Church.

"sharing one's faith" was the expected norm for a committed follower of Jesus, and to not be sharing laid that person's faith open to question. With regard to two of the churches, the interviewees clearly linked openly evangelizing with their self-understanding of their new identity and their role in society as a community. For instance, there are strong links between the Mountain Church's intended missional focus and their perception of who they are as a community. As previously noted, the Mountain Church, particularly the leadership, seek to define themselves as an extended family or clan within the "tribe of Jesus."[17] Much of the community life of the fellowship is intentionally expressed in familial terms and the close involvement in each other's lives is most readily understood in that paradigm. Seeing themselves as a new family/clan within a wider spiritual tribe translates into mission expressed as the invitation for those outside this new family to be reconciled with the patriarch (Jesus Christ)[18] and become part of the family. Relational mission is not unique to the Druze context but, interestingly enough, the Mountain Church's missional practice is framed within familial thinking. Raed described the church's mission as "the family business"[19] and I personally heard in one of their meetings the relief effort among refugees described as "adopting" a certain number of families to care for physically. The strategy of reaching out to families rather than individuals, while again not unique to this context, reinforces the suggestion that the Mountain Church's self-description is a key influence in their corporate missional approach. The same could be said for the strategy of developing Mountain Church adherents into patriarchs and have them assume those roles in different Druze village communities to communicate the teachings of Jesus and influence society.

In a similar vein Mohammed states that over half of the adherents would affirm the common missional goal. This vision for reaching out to the rest of the community is rooted in their self-understanding as the *nawwat al khallas* (nucleus of salvation).[20] They are a small group with a universal salvific message for the Palestinian people. They seek to persuade people that this message that should be embraced by all offers salvation and solutions, yet will not force them to change their collective identity as Muslims. Change comes at a core fundamental level.[21]

Wright follows a similar path of exploration as he examines the Pauline churches. Convinced that their message was a message for the whole world,[22] Wright sees their missional praxis

[17] See section Muslim Voices II, Mountain Church.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Raed: "I am a son of God, and being part of his family I'm part of the family business, that's the mission. Okay? So you can't separate the family from the business here. So when God goes to work, he takes me with him. My father is in farming, so I'm in farming. Or my father is in shipping, I'm in shipping. My father is in church planting, I'm in church planting. I don't see how you can separate the two actually."
[20] See section Muslim Voices II, Interview Analysis.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Wright, *New Testament,* 360.

flowing out of their self-understanding as a new movement, the true people of God, and the fulfillment of God's plan for creation.[23] Whether all embraced this missional vision is impossible to say[24] but it certainly appears to be the focus of much of the apostolic teaching and demonstrates the idea of a shared purpose.[25] Here it appears that the Camp Churches can identify to a certain degree with what Wright would see as a distinctive of the early church movement. Whereas Wright, however, proposes that in some aspects the church realized Israel's hopes and purpose,[26] the Camp Churches would regard themselves in some way as bringers of a message that gives new hope and meaning to the Palestinian people.[27]

The way that the new churches have formed community also shares some similarities with the early church movement. Each of the new communities from Muslim background have developed or are developing an insider language or, as Meeks terms it, "a language of belonging." Meeks identifies the familial terms of the New Testament as some of this language of belonging. In addition, he identifies New Testament terms like "elect" and "chosen" as contributing to this insider language.[28] The new churches and networks also use these relational words among themselves and to describe themselves to others.[29] The missional term "nucleus of salvation" used by the Camp Church network or the "tribe of Jesus" language used by the Mountain Church also create a distinctiveness between the groups and the wider community. It would appear to create among the adherents a deeper sense of belonging to that group. Meeks also drew attention to the early churches' use of what he termed the "language of separation."[30] Here the comparison between the early churches and the new emerging churches is mixed. Though each of the contemporary churches made a clear distinction between righteous or honorable behavior and unrighteous behavior, this distinction was often based not only on New Testament teaching but also on values of accepted behavior that were shared with the wider society.[31] The distinction between the new churches and other aspects of society is less clear. It would often depend on the attitude of the congregation to the dominant religion of the community, with the Camp Church network being the most favorable and the rest of the new churches being less so. The resultant language reflected that spectrum.[32]

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[23] Ibid., 369.
[24] Interestingly, Bosch doesn't think there was much of a missionary outreach by ordinary believers. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 140.
[25] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 148-150.
[26] Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God,* 1107.
[27] See section Muslim Voices in Context II, Camp Church.
[28] See section Early Church Voices, Early churches beyond Jerusalem.
[29] See, for example, sections Muslim Voices I, City Church and Interview Analysis.
[30] See section Early Church Voices, Early churches beyond Jerusalem.
[31] See sections Muslim Voices I, Interview Analysis and Muslim Voices II, Camp Church.
[32] See sections Muslim Voices II: Mountain Church, City Church, Village Church, Camp Church.

The early churches created physical boundaries between their adherents and the wider society. Their members were expected to act in some ways physically different from society, such as refraining from sex outside of marriage or refusing to participate in idolatrous rituals.[33] However, unlike the Qumran community,[34] the early Pauline churches actively participated in many aspects of the everyday life of their towns and cities.[35] In a similar fashion, the new churches continue to engage with their families and society around them as much as possible. There were some physical boundaries between these communities and the rest of society. Illicit sex is considered shameful by both the churches and the Muslim community but at least two of the churches encourage (but don't enforce) endogamy (Mountain 1 and Village).[36] The Village and Camp networks only allow those people to attend their meetings who are invited by a regular attendee. While meetings in the Mountain Churches and the City Church are open for any to attend (in similar fashion to the early churches, perhaps) there is an informal, relational (rather than physical) process by which attendees become part of the community. Four of the churches or networks (City, Mountain 1, Mountain 2, and Village) clearly teach a withdrawal from participation in any Muslim or Druze religious ritual.[37]

The question can be asked why there are areas of commonality between the new emerging churches from Muslim background and the early churches. As previously noted, a shared value highlighted in the interviews was the high regard that each of the new emerging churches from non-Christian background held for the New Testament. Studying the teachings contained in the *Injil* are central to their worship praxis and are often rigorously applied to the adherents' everyday lives. It would be reasonable to assume that this practice would be a contributing factor to this commonality. It must be noted, however, that it does not appear from the interviews that the new emerging churches specifically focused in their New Testament studies on worship forms or spiritual community formation. There could be a number of additional explanations for these similarities. As has been demonstrated, one of the primary influences in the formation of community has been the church planter. The church planters have taken the lead and live exemplary lives, patiently enduring suffering, extending forgiveness to enemies, actively engaging society in witness, etc. It was apparent from the interviews that each of the leaders was well versed in the Christian Scriptures and most likely were instrumental in leading their fellowships in the adoption of biblical values.

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[33] See section Early Church Voices, Early churches beyond Jerusalem.

[34] See John J. Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community: The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009).

[35] See section Early Church Voices, Early churches beyond Jerusalem, Patterns of mission.

[36] Mahboub: "And how do you see God in this passage? Do you think it is good to let your daughter marry, for example, to a Muslim man and you are a believer right now? So this is why Abdul Karim told me clearly like my kids I want them to learn about Jesus. I don't want them to be in a public, secular school."

[37] See sections Muslim Voices II: Mountain Church, City Church, Village Church.

The same could also be said regarding elements of the new emerging churches' worship forms. Some form of extemporaneous prayer expression (as opposed to the many ritual prayers found in Islam), teaching from the Christian Scriptures, rituals like baptism and the Eucharist, as well as regular, often weekly, gatherings are common among all the churches. It is interesting to note that the three new churches that have very similar worship forms to a typical evangelical church in the city or in a Western country, i.e. the City Church and the two Mountain Churches, have leaders (Boutros, Boulos, Noor, Raed, and Rashid) that were heavily involved in evangelical churches prior to their church planting efforts.[38] The two new church networks (Village and Camp) have church planters with little exposure to evangelical communities and who seem comfortable with more of a Bible study structure with an emphasis on interactive study, non-liturgical prayer, fellowship, and mutual accountability. Each of them (Mahboub, Mohammed, and Isa) began their own Jesus-centered faith journeys through a Bible study. Therefore, a possible reason for some of the similarities with the early church movement is the adoption of evangelical worship forms (either from a worship service or a Bible study) by the church planter. Where similarities exist, particularly in regard to the elements of worship, between the evangelical expression in the region and the early church movement, these have been passed on in varying degrees to the new churches.[39]

Another possible reason for apparent similarities between the early church movement and the new churches is the common ways that movements gather themselves and begin to form community. Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou have examined the ways that religious groups are compelled to take on social forms in order to maintain relationships, worship together and propagate their beliefs to outsiders and the next generation.[40] These groups over time often transition from movements to institutions with a more formalized structure. At their onset, however, these religious gatherings are most often founded by a first generation of believers who have paid a high price socially (and possibly physically) for their beliefs. Most probably leaving some aspect of their old life behind, these founders tend to form close relationships with each other and bind together with a oneness of purpose. The congregations often form around kinship groups or other small, local expressions of community and have fluid, informal leadership structures with central, dynamic leaders who gather followers around their personal charisma. These are traits that both the new churches and, it would appear, the early Christian movement share in common. In this light it is understandable that the two movements look so similar.

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[38] See sections Muslim Voices I: Interview Analysis, Praxis, Motivations; Muslim Voices II, City Church.

[39] By elements of worship I mean in the very broadest terms the worship praxes found commonly in many churches today, i.e. prayer, Scripture reading or study, singing, the sacraments, etc. It is acknowledged that little is known about the worship practices of the early first century churches beyond those broad categories. See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem.

[40] Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 333-346.

Differences to Discuss

In addition to exploring the apparent similarities, it is possible to bring the early church movement and the new churches into a critical conversation in the hope that the new churches may find some beneficial input for their ongoing faith journeys.

Isolationism

The five different fellowships have each developed specific structures appropriate to the particular context in which the church has emerged. One of the significant characteristics of each of these structures is the extent to which they interact with other Christian communities. The Camp and Village Church networks have created models of church (small groups that meet in homes) that are adapted to their particularly difficult contexts and have carried with those models a resultant isolationism.[41] Both Mountain Churches share to a lesser degree a similar stance. The aim for all five churches is to create distinct and separate identities which they achieve with varying degrees of success. The great strength of these churches is their ability to engage their societies as insiders[42] rather than converts to another religion. They then continue to exist within their network of relationships, speaking of and living out their faith convictions with those they know. To remain embedded, however, they essentially need to remain separate from other Christians and churches, as a close identification with another community is potentially perceived as a betrayal of one's own community. As mentioned, Isa, from the Camp Church network, related how his spending time with known Christians resulted in his friend's asking if he too had become a Christian.[43] The inference from the interview was that this was not a positive descriptor. Yet the isolation that is created by the very act of remaining embedded in a close-knit, ostracized, and, to a certain degree, xenophobic community then cuts off the possibility of healthy discourse afforded by interaction with other Christian communities.

Dunn believes that, regardless of the fact that the early church was a diverse network of various house churches, they did still regard themselves as part of a greater entity. He believes the unifying belief that every church was a partner in the mission of Jesus was a major contributing factor.[44] Despite the difficulties of travel and communication, the early church movement continued to maintain contact among the churches and sought to preserve the unity of the churches. They clearly saw the importance of working toward maintaining the relational bonds

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[41] See sections Muslim Voices in Context II: Village Church, Camp Church.

[42] There is some ambivalence with the Mountain Churches as to their identity, as evidenced in the interviews with Raed and Rashid. They do, however, maintain their network of relationships. See section Muslim Voices I, Interview Analysis, Praxis, Form.

[43] See section Muslim Voices in Context II, Camp Church.

[44] See section Early Church Voices, General Overview.

of spiritual brothers and sisters bound together by their shared faith.[45] He uses the body metaphor to illustrate that the situation in Ephesus not only affected the local believers there but also in some way affected all the other believers in the region. The familial connection was maintained through personal visits of commissioned leaders and apostles and through written communication.[46] It is obvious that the early churches, despite the physical difficulties and societal pressure, regarded the unity and ongoing relationships between the fellowships as of paramount importance.[47] How would the Mountain, Village, and Camp fellowships dialogue regarding this particular early church value?

From the interviews it is quite clear that, apart from the City Church, few if any of the adherents in the other churches have ongoing relationships with local Christians that could be described in familial terms. The leadership does have some contact with the Christian community on occasion but this has not always been positive. Mahboub, from the Village Church network, related a very negative encounter between an evangelical pastor and a relatively new Muslim background member in his network.[48] Mahboub shared this story in the context of why he dissuades his adherents from forming relationships with evangelical Christians. Sharing Mahboub's caution, the Camp Church network would see it as physically dangerous to have a strong relationship with the evangelical community. Of course, theologically they all believe they are spiritually linked (as Raed states, "We are a clan in the worldwide tribe of Jesus"),[49] but their relationships with other churches are often theoretical. In consequence they would not naturally share the strong relational commitment that the early Christian movement shared. Another major factor in all of the new churches' thinking is the deep commitment to mission that is shared by all the churches. For four of the churches, strong ties with the evangelical community would, in their opinion, hinder their missional engagement with the wider society. As mission is such a high value with the new churches this adds another reason why these churches are isolated from the wider Christian community.

Social Structures

Each of the new churches being studied has borrowed a recognizable social structure from society around which adherents coalesce as they continue to build community. This need that the new faith expressions have for structure (a common trait among all religious expressions)[50] is mirrored, according to Meeks, in the early churches. Williams joins him in asserting, however, that while the early churches borrowed heavily from local social structures, such as the

[45] See Meeks, *Urban Christians,* 107-110.
[46] Ibid., 113.
[47] Ibid., 107-110.
[48] See section Muslim Voices in Context II, Village Church.
[49] See section Muslim Voices in Context II, Mountain Church.
[50] Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 43.

household or the synagogue, these structures were adapted to express the new social reality of the gospel. The particular example he highlighted was in the area of leadership and the tensions between the household model of leadership and the model of leadership found in the Christian fellowships.[51] He opines that the adopted social structure was subservient to the faith community and its faith convictions. The challenging conversation between the early churches and the new churches centers around this question: "Are the respective adopted social structures placing limits upon the authentic gospel expressed in community?" An obvious area of examination is the gender and, to some extent, generational separation inherent in the Qur'anic study type social structure used by the Camp Church network. Obviously culture, with all its complexity, is a significant factor in any church expression, particularly in the area of family, relationships, gender roles, etc.,[52] and does have an influence here. It must be said that inculturation is vital. However, while those churches are happy to borrow from the pre-existing religious model of a Qur'anic study, one wonders if there are areas where the gospel message and its impact on culture is lessened by the adoption of this model. Is the strict separation between the sexes found in the Qur'an study model potentially in conflict with egalitarian principles expressed in a verse like Galatians 3:28 or in the familial paradigm expressed in the language of inclusion found throughout the New Testament?[53]

First century synagogues had separate areas for men and women but retained a combined time for worship.[54] As the early churches met in homes, the possibility for separate worship areas for men and women, following the synagogue model (some of which also were established in homes), could have existed in a villa but certainly not in the tenement housing due to their size.[55] Numerous New Testament references would indicate that men and women did worship together in the first century (at least in the Pauline churches), no matter where they stood or sat (1 Corinthians 14:33-35, 1 Corinthians 11:5-7, etc.). Why did they do this? Was corporate worship a matter of convenience, an acceptable cultural form, or rather an expression of their faith principles imbedded in the gospel message? Osiek, et al., sees the involvement of women in all aspects of church life to be a result of the church participating in the prevailing social change regarding the role of women that was emerging in the Roman Empire at that time.[56] If that is true, then some of the churches with full participation of both sexes were actually just worshipping in a culturally acceptable form rather than living out a countercultural challenge.

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[51] See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem.
[52] See Miriam Adeney, "Why Cultures Matter," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 32, no. 2 (2015): 93-97.
[53] See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem.
[54] Joseph Jacobs and A.W. Brunner. n.d. "Synagogue Architecture." JewishEncyclopedia.com. Accessed February 4th, 2016. http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14161-synagogue-architecture.
[55] Osiek, MacDonald, and Tulloch, *A Woman's Place,* 4. See Schnabel's argument for villa-based house churches over tenement houses in Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 300-303.
[56] They observe changes in marriage laws, the mixing of men and women at public feasts, women administering their own property, owning their own businesses, etc. Osiek, MacDonald, and Tulloch, *A Woman's Place,* 2, 3.

That possibly is not true in regard to the social distance between rich and poor, slave and free, and in the ethnic distinctions between Jew and Gentile. The gospel message still continued to challenge existing social norms in these areas, at least within the church community.[57] On the other hand, although the principle of equality[58] permeates Paul's writings, there appears to have been limits in its social applications (like in the institution of slavery).[59] As we bring these observations into conversation with the Camp Church network, the question must be asked to what extent it is permissible to allow their understanding of the gospel to be limited by culture in its social application. It would be plausible for the Camp Churches to counter with the charge that it is shameful for men and women not related by blood or marriage to meet together and to do so would compromise another aspect of the gospel message, i.e. holy living. This in turn would adversely affect the credibility of their missional praxis in society.[60]

Mohammed is not oblivious to the inherent weakness of a community that forbids men, women, and children worshipping together.[61] He feels trapped by his culture and societal norms and allows the ever-present conviction of mission to override an equally compelling challenge of the creation of new community often regarded by outsiders as a "sociological impossibility."[62] However, the question can be asked if this segregation is a fundamental error to be corrected or a weakness to be addressed. If it is the former, then it is clear that the Camp Church faces an uphill battle, perhaps even one that threatens their continuation, as they break the strict social code prevalent in the camps and merge the segregated meetings. If it is the latter, which is where I would tend to lean, particularly in light of the statements made by both Mohammed and Isa, then greater effort needs to be made to compensate for this segregation with intentional social visits, family to family, where aspects of worship (e.g. prayer) could be incorporated. When this matter was raised in the interview (as a possible application of Galatians 3:28), they believed that this could happen in the future.[63] Possibly this reflects the

[57] Davidson, *The Birth of the Church,* 72.
[58] It would appear that women enjoyed a more equal position in Pauline churches than in Judaism at that time. See Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 151, and Meeks, *First Urban Christians,* 81. Osiek, et al., question whether this was a result of the gospel. Osiek, MacDonald, and Tulloch, *A Woman's Place,* 2.
[59] E.g. Galatians 3:28 and slavery. See Philip H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus,* The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 1 Timothy chapter 2 exegesis.
[60] See section Muslim Voices in Context II, Camp Church.
[61] Ibid. Mohammad: "Well…unfortunately it's not right, it's not fair to abide by that kind of social norm, but we have to. And you know, it makes it easier…for the people to get involved. And we cannot, as I told you, we cannot break the rule. We cannot break this rule. Although without it things could be different, more positive."
[62] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 48.
[63] See section Muslim Voices II, Camp Church. Mohammad has stated that he believes that the segregated meetings are a weakness that can reinforce the gender inequality found in society. Isa believes that equality is a goal that needs to be achieved but does not exist yet. This suggests to me that rather than slipping unthinkingly into an accepted cultural practice, Mohammad and Isa are aware of the deeper issues at stake and are wondering how to address them.

adequacy of the adopted social structure as a useful model for disseminating the gospel message but less for the maturation of an ongoing church.

Inclusive or Exclusive

A similar conversation can be had with the Village Church network, not in regard to gender but rather in regard to seekers or believers outside of their immediate family or close circle of friends. In the second round of interviews, Mahboub revealed that because of the high level of distrust found in Muslim society, he allows the respective group leaders to decide who attends and who does not attend the house churches. As the house churches are most often made up of family members, this approach does deal with the cultural expectations of mixing of the sexes and also addresses some valid security concerns. However, it also raises some areas for discussion regarding the inclusiveness of community formation. It would appear from Mahboub's statement that this model of community formation was adopted because of the distrust in society. The hints we have from the early churches, however, seem to indicate that most often, particularly in the Pauline churches, people from different ethnic and social backgrounds met together. Despite the problems that this caused, they did continue to seek this unity in order to promote the universality of the gospel message and to practically demonstrate the outworking of the ministry of reconciliation.[64]

A question needs to be asked of the Village Church network if this model of church, perhaps as an expedient method of early community formation, tends to reinforce the very cultural bias toward distrust that Mahboub has identified. He did organize three corporate worship meetings (restricted by gender) over a period of time but it appeared that these meetings were unusual and organized on an ad hoc basis. His preferred model remains separate meetings for Sunni and Shiites and, within those communities, separate meetings structured around individual families. Is this model, though culturally appropriate, denying some fundamental aspect of the gospel message? Is it possible to point to the dispute in Galatians 2 between Paul and Cephas regarding Jews and Gentiles eating together and draw some similarities?[65]

Schnabel's conclusion from the incident in Antioch is that Paul is staunchly defending the principle that there is "one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Corinthians 8:6) and that therefore:

> Paul's emphasis on the unity of a local congregation in which Jews, proselytes, God-fearers, and Greeks and Romans who have come to faith in Jesus Christ live and learn

[64] See Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 52, on why he thinks this ultimately failed between Jew and Gentile.
[65] See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem.

> and worship together proceeds from the foundational significance of the missionary message he preaches.[66]

In consequence he is adamant that Cephas, Barnabas, and the other Jews eat, and by inference, fellowship and worship together with the Gentiles.[67] Could this be a challenge for the Village Church network? Should they be addressing the natural distrust that exists between religious, ethnic and family groups as rigorously as they have been addressing their communal attitude toward enemies? Mahboub, who evidently embodies the principle of gospel equality, freely moves between all the groups (Sunni and Shiite) and worships with each of the families. How can that attitude be replicated beyond Mahboub and become a principle and praxis of the entire network?

Fellowship

Inherent in the structures adopted by both the Camp Church network and the Village Church network is the lack of fellowship between ordinary adherents of the various house groups in each respective network. Due to the general perception of being scrutinized by the wider (sometimes hostile) society, leadership in both the church networks have decided that the individual groups should not enjoy fellowship together.[68] Within an Arab Muslim context that would be described as a collectivist culture[69] with the ensuing tendency to gather with all those with whom one has a relationship or connection, one wonders if the enforced fragmentation places a strain upon fellowship development. There appear to be some hints in the New Testament that even though there are several congregations named (for example in Romans 16: 14,15) in a particular city, both Paul and the believers in that city still regarded the different congregations as part of one church.[70] Emphasizing the unity of the church through expressions like the "body of Christ," the "temple of God," the "bride of Christ," the "family of God," etc., it is clear from his letters that Paul engaged all the believers in one locale as one entity[71] (1 Corinthians 1:2). It can be surmised that these house churches sought to establish ties with each other, maintain relationships with each other, and gather together on occasion. Of course, the differing contexts must be taken into account, yet the underlying principles of oneness and

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[66] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 406.
[67] Ibid.*,* 407.
[68] See sections Muslim Voices I: Camp Church, Village Church.
[69] Geert H. Hofstede, *Culture Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001), 215.
[70] Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 164, 165. Gehring makes an argument for viewing the whole church (1 Corinthians 14:23) that gathered in Rome or Corinth as being a conglomerate of individual congregations that met in homes.
[71] P.T. O'Brian, "The Church as Heavenly and Eschatological Entity," in *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study,* ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1993), 89. Also see Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary,* 233-235.

relationship stressed in the New Testament must also be considered. Though it is perfectly understandable and possibly necessary at this time that the small house groups do not have a relationship with each other, yet one wonders if this problem may well need to be addressed creatively as the movement continues to grow. Perhaps the use of feasts, celebrations, etc., to create a neutral space to gather to at least socialize may be a constructive start.

Leadership issues

A fruitful conversation could be had around the appointing of leaders and the model of leadership that the new churches employ. In three of the churches (City, Mountain, and Camp) mission was a motivating factor in the choosing and development of leaders. In all the churches, building the congregations was also a major motivation.[72] In the Mountain (1 and 2) and City Churches, which have weekly corporate gatherings, new leaders led with supervision from the main pastor/shepherd or leadership group. On the other hand, leadership development for two of the congregations (Village and Camp) appears to be strongly influenced by the Discovery Bible Study methodology. In general, the study groups begin by appointing facilitators to convene and direct the study. Character and faith is not considered a major issue as the facilitator is not seen as an "elder" after the New Testament example but rather more like a host to an event. Both the Camp and Village Churches found candidates for leadership among the participants in the various Bible study groups. Mahboub (Village) still attends the different house churches regularly. Within the Camp Church network, however, there appears to be a certain degree of autonomy given to the house groups and certainly none of the senior leadership attend the weekly meetings or interact regularly with those respective attendees.

In the interviews Mohammed and Isa stated that they made a distinction between those who were "believers" (those who acknowledged the faith claims of Christ) and "followers" (those who obeyed the faith claims of Christ). It is possible in the Camp Church network structure to have a small group leader who has natural leadership abilities but who would not fall into the "follower" category; this is for the simple reason that no one else is available.[73] Mohammed and Isa do not see this as ideal and are quick to look for someone who is teachable, ostensibly with the hope that he would be discipled into being a "follower" rather than just a "believer." Clearly this is a situation placed upon them by the rapid growth that the Camp Church is experiencing and is viewed as an acceptable risk.

Interestingly, in the DBS methodology a mutual accountability is developed between attendees in regard to being obedient to a personal conviction arrived at as a result of the study. Those who do not follow up on those convictions eventually are asked to leave the group. Clearly

[72] See sections Muslim Voices II: Mountain Church, second Mountain Church, City Church.

[73] Mohammed: "Sometimes in our groups…we find followers but who don't have the characteristics of a leader. So to choose the leader we follow the criteria I told you about, and we see the person is ready to learn to teach."

when Mohammed refers to the leaders as not being "followers one hundred percent," he is not referring to this dynamic. It would rather appear that the group leader is probably at a similar stage as most other attendees in the group in their faith journey and perhaps could be regarded as a facilitator rather than a leader who leads by example. In the New Testament writings, the character of the leader/elder was the subject of a number of passages (e.g. 1 Timothy 3:13, Titus 1:5-9), not only to promote godly example and leadership but also in the preserving and passing on of those values and traditions to the congregations.[74] As the groups operate semi-independently (i.e. the group of eight regularly have contact with the group leaders but not with the attendees), one wonders how the average attendee is exposed to the example of the "follower of Isa," as he is constantly engaging with a society and a religious system not centered on the teachings of Christ. To whom does he or she go for counsel in times of need or stress? Is true community able to be formed if the leader does not yet hold to all the convictions of that community? How does effective mission happen if the leader does not yet believe in the missional message to such a degree that his lifestyle is changed?

Clearly the Camp Church leadership has allowed "believers" not "followers" to take some form of leadership due to the pressure of growth. In contrast, Mahboub in the Village Church network still retains a strong leader/shepherd role and moves from house group to house group attending and, in the case of the Shiite meetings, leading. Leadership development among the Sunni, with a corresponding numerical growth, has been encouraging to Mahboub. Among the Shiites, however, he has not been able to find and develop more leadership within the eleven house churches. He began the first Shiite group in 2008. He states that it is because there remains a question regarding the spiritual maturity (which would include character and missional vision) of the adherents. As mentioned previously, from 2013-2015 he has planted seven Sunni house churches, all with local leadership, while increasing the number of Shiite groups from seven to eleven during the same period. As he is still the shepherd/leader for all of the Shiite groups, it would seem that missional growth among the Shiites in the Village Church network context is limited to the capacity of the church planter to take on more groups. One advantage of the Pauline model was that the appointment of elders, perhaps as an initial stage of closure to the resident ministry of the apostolic team, allowed movement of the apostolic team on to the next place of ministry.[75] This tension between finding leaders of character and yet not hindering the growth of a spiritual movement is a common one faced by all the churches.

[74] Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 207.
[75] See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem.

Patriarchal leadership

Another potential discussion is between the early church movement and "the Lord's Family" (Mountain Church) fellowship. The area of concern does not lie with the adoption of the clan structure as a means of expressing loyalty, love, and service in a contextually acceptable paradigm but rather with the model of leadership that typically exists within the extended family social structure. It is clear that Raed has adopted the position of patriarch within the Mountain Church and there are indications that there are high mutual expectations between the patriarch and the rest of the clan. Raed speaks of investing in people and counseling them in their marriages and family lives (not untypical for a pastor in many other contexts) but then also mentions giving business advice, extending financial support, and relocating and providing employment for struggling church members on top of giving spiritual guidance, regular theological teaching, and defining the clan's values and attitudes toward the wider Druze society. Though Raed states that patriarchs in effect do not have any real authority[76] but rather serve the rest of the clan, this claim does not seem to agree with the description of his involvement in individuals' lives. Certainly the permission for involvement is freely given by the individual, according to Raed. He recounts how members of the Mountain Church have come to him, expressed their appreciation for him, how they regarded him as a father figure and are submitted to him.[77]

This does appear similar to Theissen and Schutz's proposed model of love-patriarchalism suggesting how a church modeled around a household could have possibly functioned. The socially stronger showed love and respect to the poorer/weaker members and the weaker ones reciprocated with "subordination, fidelity, and esteem."[78] However, in light of the eventual church split, particularly as it was between two of the socially stronger couples in the fellowship,[79] one should ask if the traditional patriarchal role is too restrictive for the Mountain Church context. Although Rashid was on the church's leadership team, he was asked to step down as a leader after twelve years of attending the fellowship, many of those in a leadership position. Despite tactfully inquiring of both Rashid and Raed the root cause of why Rashid was asked to step down, I was unable to discover the cause. My own observations suggest that in the Mountain Church, with its strong, highly relational, and deeply involved leadership model, there is only room for one patriarch. This would appear to lead to weaknesses of this model in the areas of succession planning and the raising up of other leaders.

It is interesting to note that both Meeks and Schnabel believe that while living in a patriarchal society the early churches still were led by a plurality of leadership even at the local church

[76] See section Muslim Voices II, Mountain Church.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Theissen and Schutz, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, 108.
[79] Rashid is a surgeon, educated in Europe, running a successful practice in the mountains. Raed is also Western-educated and from a large, prominent, extended family in the Druze community. Both are affluent.

level.[80] Similar leadership structures were found in the Jewish Sanhedrin and most Hellenistic cities with their "council of elders."[81] While the New Testament is open about leadership problems (e.g. 2 Corinthians 10-13, Galatians 2:11-13) there appears to be at least an understanding that different leaders could hold each other to account. An issue here may be the expression of patriarchalism (local clan leader) that has been adopted by the Mountain Church where ultimate authority lies with one man.

Another potential point of weakness is in the area of reciprocity. Patriarchs operate often in a patron-client paradigm with services being given by the patriarch with an unstated expectation that there will be some form of reciprocity.[82] Care must be taken that the raising up of patriarchs does not begin to journey on to the well-worn cultural path of give-and-take, particularly in the area of group formation and attendance. Though the "rice Christian" phenomenon is by no means unique to the Druze context, there is concern that the Mountain Church leadership, heavily invested in the cultural patriarchal model, will be unable to discern some of the more typical unhealthy practices.

In the common pattern of the Middle Eastern patron-client paradigm, one wonders whether those who have not extended the same permission and submission to Raed received the same care and attention, as well as spiritual and other support in times of need. Certainly the process he uses to discern who is in the clan and who is not is quite intuitive and one must question whether at times it is related to people regarding him as the patriarch and submitting to him. Rashid and his family, as one of the strong social units in the fellowship, had less of an obvious material and social need to utilize the patron-client relationship. Over the twelve years in attendance, some of those years spent in leadership, and as a teacher of the Bible, Rashid may have needed less theological input as well. As an emerging "patriarch type" figure himself, it may be that Rashid and his family eventually did not fit comfortably into the social structure of the Mountain Church.

As to the accuracies of the preceding observations, they are difficult to confirm without frank input from both Raed and Rashid. As mentioned, this was something that I was unable to obtain. However, the praxis of the early churches in the apostolic era appears to be one of modification and indeed rejection of social practices when they came into conflict with the values expressed in the teachings and life example of the Christ. Schnabel examines the apostle Paul's stern critique of the Corinthian church's view of spiritual leadership which was, in the apostle's opinion, firmly rooted in the value system of Roman society. He addresses their loyalty to certain teachers at the expense of unity, their love of status, their tolerance of immorality

[80] See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem.
[81] Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission,* vol. 1*,* 431.
[82] Sania Hamady, *Temperament and Character of the Arabs* (New York: Irvington Pub., 1960), 84.

and of the church social elite, etc.[83] Rather than critique the particular Corinthian text as Schnabel does, I seek to use this as an indication of the principle of modification practiced by the early church. In this discussion of modification, Meeks believes that the early churches had to come to grips with the potential conflict between the traditional position of authority held by the head of households and the overarching spiritual authority held by the apostles.[84] Williams suggests that the early church possibly modified the household structure and replaced the head of household/patron position with the office of steward.[85]

Is this a beneficial conversation for the Mountain Church? Does the office of patriarch, indeed even the social structure of the clan, need to be modified to combat a common cultural pattern that may be contrary to the kingdom values expressed in the New Testament? Raed expresses great appreciation for the unity now found in the Mountain Church (after the split), but perhaps this unity is an expression rather of the harmony experienced after those who did not fit into the clan structure left. This is a complex situation but, potentially, a healthy conversation could ensue from the early church example, particularly if outside voices are allowed to join. Though challenging, much could be gained from the Mountain Church remaining open to others from different regional contexts speaking into their contextual particularity.

Summary

This chapter's purpose was to create space for fruitful conversation between the early church movement and the five new churches/house church networks in the Near East region. After comparing attitudes and praxis, the section entitled "Similarities to Affirm" detailed the areas where there were apparent similarities. Those similarities would indicate to an outside observer a possible shared nature with the early church movement despite the different contexts and emerging structures. The "Differences to Discuss" section brought into dialogue some of the differences between the two ecclesial contexts. Issues that touched the limits of contextualization, appropriate church forms, the possible non-negotiable aspects of community formation, and appropriate leadership models were raised and discussed with suggestions for future steps.

[83] See section Early Church Voices, Early Churches beyond Jerusalem.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Williams, *Stewards, Prophets, Keepers of the Word,* 37.

Conclusion

This study has been conducted in response to the emergence of an unusual phenomenon in the Near East region. Faith communities based on the teachings of the Christian Scriptures have begun to appear over the last twenty years in increasing numbers. What makes these faith communities unusual is the fact that the majority of adherents are from Muslim or Druze religious backgrounds and are choosing to congregate with others of like backgrounds to follow the teachings of Christ. As there has been little in-depth academic research into the formation and the ongoing praxis of these communities in the Near East, in contrast to the study of individual faith journeys, I became motivated to research those very areas. In addition, as these new church expressions often appear to be dedicated to the study of the Christian Scriptures, I became very interested in how these new churches compared to the early church movement of the apostolic period. At first glance, there appeared to be some similarities between the early church movement and these new faith communities.[1] My research question then became:

> How do the patterns of mission and church planting among Muslim and Druze communities in the Near East compare with those patterns in the early church movement during the apostolic period?

To answer this question I firstly chose single churches or house church networks that identified themselves as a faith community of Believers from Muslim Background (BMBs), or as a community of believers from Druze background, and who based their teachings on the Christian Scriptures.[2] Having identified the churches, I then met and interviewed several that had a relationship with that particular church, seeking to understand how the churches formed, what was their contemporary worship praxis, and a description of their missional engagement in the wider community. These interviews were semi-structured and for the most part highly conversational. The results of the first round of eleven interviews not only gave some indication of mission and community formation patterns common to the four churches for comparison with the early church movement but also raised further questions for conversation with that same movement. The patterns and the significant questions were then used as a basis for a conversation with the early church movement, comparing patterns and seeking helpful dialogue around these critical issues.

To arrive at a possible description of the early church movement in the apostolic period the work of five significant scholars (Bosch, Dunn, Meeks, Schnabel, and Wright) who have written about early church mission, worship, and community was examined. An attempt to synthesize

[1] See section Early Church Voices.
[2] See Methodology chapter for a fuller description of this process.

their research, with of course the contributions of many others, resulted in a hermeneutical framework within which a meaningful conversation with the BMB or Druze churches could be conducted. The results of this examination raised discussion points that formed the basis for the interview questions of the round two interview cycle. The second round of seven interviews was conducted with the church leaders after a period of three to four years which was, in essence, a part of an ongoing conversation and comparison with the early church movement. The interview data was analyzed and again certain common themes were identified.

Both rounds of interviews brought to light certain common themes. The missional praxis of the four churches was, generally speaking, highly relational, engaging family, friends, and colleagues personally by the sharing of faith experiences and the teachings of Christ as found in the New Testament. Because this engagement utilized the existing network of relationships of each adherent, the "sharing" tended to be restricted to people with the same faith background as the one sharing. The patterns of mission were also intrinsically linked to living an upright, holy, and honorable life in accordance with the Christian Scriptures.

How the community was formed (church planting) was also highly relational and efforts were made by all to move the church from being just a meeting or a Bible study to creating community. The use of space, either a home or a center, was an influential factor in how the shape of that particular community developed. The interviews also brought to light other major influences on how these new churches lived out mission or formed community. The church planter himself, and how he understood himself and the Bible in his context, was unsurprisingly shown to be a major influence in the church's journey. He (they were all male) often guided the fellowship in their understanding of who they were (e.g. Christian, followers of Isa, cultural Muslim, etc.) and how they related to the wider Muslim or Druze society around them. How the wider society regarded the church also was an influencing factor in their missional posture, their faith community formation, and their worship praxis.

If I ask, "How do the patterns of mission and church planting among Muslim and Druze communities compare with those patterns in the early church movement during the apostolic period?" I would summarize the answer with several observations.

It came to light that the way community was formed in both broad contexts was clearly similar. This was done through various common practices (specific argot, shared vision, established leadership, regular times of personal interaction, etc.) and the borrowing of a recognized social structure (household, clan, Qur'anic study circle, etc.) as a framework upon which to grow Christian community. In four of the churches, withdrawing from the practice of previously observed religious rituals was another shared characteristic. A corporately-owned missional vision, embracing the normalcy and efficacy of suffering, was also a trait shared with the early church movement. Bringing an adherent's behavior in line with what is taught in the New

Testament was an expectation of all the churches, both in the first century and the twenty-first. Particularly of note was the position taken toward the communities' enemies, basically that of forgiveness, with the resulting relational cost to the congregation.

Where there were possible differences between the two contexts, conversations were held around those differences. One of the conversations that arose revolved around the isolationism that was practiced particularly by the Camp Church and the Village Church networks. Another common theme was the relationship between the majority religion of the host community (Druze, Sunni or Shiite Islam) and the congregation itself. Significant discussion was undertaken around the subject of the adoption of recognizable social structures as a framework for community formation. The discussion mainly focused on how extensively a particular societal structure should dictate the growth and development of the spiritual community. Further conversation was also held around leadership selection and the potential strengths and weaknesses of patriarchal leadership models.

Areas for Further Study

There were a number of areas that were encountered as the field research was undertaken that would have been worthy areas for study if space permitted. I include them here as suggestions for further research. During the first round of interviews the whole area of identity repeatedly emerged. As I was looking for comparisons between these new churches and the early church movement in the areas of mission and church planting, I felt that this was a line of investigation that I could not pursue without changing my research question. Tim Green, Kathryn Kraft, Jens Bartlett and others have already done fascinating and highly relevant work in the areas of a Muslim's self-understanding after embracing the faith claims of Christ. An area of further research would be in the area of exploring the issues of identity not as an individual follower of Christ but rather as a church or community. Questions could be investigated such as how does the new church describe itself now that we have changed our fundamental faith convictions? Is this self-description uniformly held by all? If not, are there multiple self-descriptions within the community? Does the community refer to the Christian Scriptures as they describe themselves? It would be very interesting to discover if this new self-description affects how relationships within the nuclear and extended family operate. This may be an indicator as to the depth of this new identity. It would also be very helpful to explore what are the future hopes of this new community. With their new faith convictions and presumably new corporate identity, do they seek to find a place in society or to eventually emigrate? It would be extremely helpful to also understand how the extended family, neighbors, and the wider society describe them. All of these questions could speak to the viability of a permanent, multi-generational community of Christ-followers from Muslim background. These areas were touched upon in my research but

warrant far more attention than what I was able to give them and still remain true to my original line of enquiry.

Related to this is the whole area of the new community's worldview. As the new fellowships embrace new faith convictions with new values and possibly new ideas and attitudes regarding the world and their host communities, discovering to what extent their worldviews have been impacted by their convictions would be extremely valuable. I believe a discussion in this area could be significant, particularly as these fellowships grow beyond the first generation of adherents to form distinct, multi-generational communities of faith. Are these new communities embracing values that are heavily influenced by the West or values that are being impacted by local contextual understanding of the Christian Scriptures? What aspects of the Near Eastern Muslim worldview are being impacted, to what extent, and by what? Again, this could speak to the long-term viability of a new community and to its effectiveness in communicating its newly held faith convictions to the wider society. Is there potential for this new community to exist in the long-term, either to be isolated as a fringe group or as a contextually relevant community with possibilities to grow both numerically and in influence? I think this also could be a fruitful and helpful topic for research.

Another subject for exploration is in the large and important field of ecclesiology. The journeys that these new emerging faith communities are undertaking, particularly as they seek to survive in an often hostile environment, are fascinating. However, they are on occasion challenging traditional expressions of church as they gather, worship, and witness. It would be very rewarding to explore with these new communities their understanding of what church is, the use of space (can a church exist within a mosque?), and their understanding of future church expressions. Bringing this exploration into discussion with contemporary and historical thinking on ecclesiology and in particular with the interplay between a local contextual expression and the wider Christian community could be very helpful. Can these small communities inform thinking around ecclesiology and help us to keep examining our concepts of church? In essence, "How far is too far?" Again, this was touched upon in my research but warrants focused theological and ecclesiological critique in a dedicated line of enquiry.

The role of women in these new fellowships and how this compares to different theological understandings regarding gender roles could be an area for further investigation. Even among the five churches examined there appeared to be differences in understanding of the role of women, which was not fully explored. It would be very helpful to discover if the role of women, firstly in the family (where entire families now hold the same faith convictions), and secondly in the new faith community now differs from societal norms. If so, why? In what ways has it changed? What is the new church's understanding of the role of women and what is informing that view? What role do the Christian Scriptures play in this and if they do play a role what is the corporate understanding of the scriptural view of women's roles? Who speaks into that

corporate understanding? Is there a place for thinking from other contexts and, if so, then how could this be viably expressed in each of the specific contexts studied? This of course would also bring into discussion the place of culture and the possibilities of new social realities.

This stage of the conversation, comparing contemporary patterns of mission and church planting among Muslim and Druze communities in the Near East to the early church movement in the apostolic period, must draw to a close. It is hoped that this research will spark off many more conversations in the future between the new emerging fellowships and the wider Christian community, between the new communities themselves, and also within each unique community. If this research has impressed upon me one thing it is that, as these very dear Christ-followers seek to stretch the boundaries in mission and community formation, one of their great dangers is to make this journey in isolation. Far healthier is a respectful but critical dialogue with multiple committed conversation partners (including the early church movement), all engaging around the vital issues that these new fellowships will have to face. My hope is that this research has given the BMB fellowships themselves a clear voice both in this conversation and in the potential discussions to come.

Appendix

Recommendations and Suggestions

As a way of furthering this discussion, I would like to offer some recommendations and suggestions to some of the different ministers who are currently active in the Middle East. These recommendations and suggestions flow out of reflections on the conversations held with different members of the five new churches. It was a unique opportunity to hear their thoughts and to examine both their model of mission and the way that they formed community. I have found their insights to be invaluable and enlightening.

Recommendations for Church Planters

- *Allow the community to create distinctions between themselves and their immediate society. This is like glue to the community.*

In mission today there is a continual push for new expressions of the church, particularly in hitherto unchurched areas (either geographical or social), to be culturally relevant and integrated into the wider society. This is particularly important so as to maintain access points for those interested inquirers currently outside of the church, enabling them to connect with those inside the church or with possible eventual discipling opportunities. A criticism of the City Church could be that the access points are greatly reduced as they ask their adherents to leave their old community (which often results in relational breakdowns) and join the Christian community. Hiebert, borrowing concepts from mathematics, introduced the concept of centered and bounded sets when describing types of churches.[3] Bounded sets were churches with high expectations of conformity before joining, while centered sets were churches oriented toward a shared value, idea or teaching (i.e. the person and work of Christ). People were welcome to the centered set church if they were moving (or deciding to move) closer to that central idea, value or teaching no matter how far along the path they were. Church planters have increasingly adopted the centered set model as they seek to form communities of faith.

Although this is an excellent evangelistic strategy, particularly for individuals, in pushing the centered set model as a church planting strategy there remains a danger of losing community definition. It would appear from this research that clear boundaries that define communities are an aid to sustainability and longevity, particularly in difficult contexts. It would not be unusual to assume that a distinct lifestyle, different from the rest of society, would be a clear community boundary. However, it was discovered in the interviews that upright and admirable behavior modeled on the teachings of Christ was very close to what is considered upright and

[3] Hiebert, "Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories," 24-29.

admirable behavior in the local Sunni, Shiite and Druze societies and did not create a clear distinction in and of itself.[4] The exception to this, however, was how one dealt with one's enemies, with the teaching of Christ to love those enemies being a clear break with societal norms and values. This then became a distinctive for the various communities, a focus of the teaching with an expectation for all adherents to embrace and comply.

Obviously, coalescing around a shared belief in the person and work of Christ can be a key boundary marker. However, the journeys of Muslims and Druze in their discovery of Christ and his teachings appeared from the interviews to be almost exclusively a gradual process rather than a crisis point (like praying the sinner's prayer) and may not be a clear boundary marker for Middle Eastern contexts. All the new churches used baptism (which included a declaration concerning the person of Christ), after a period of observation and evaluation, as a distinct boundary. This is not to say that those who were not baptized were "out" but rather that those who were baptized were most definitely "in."

The different churches also began to have a sense of calling, a new understanding of who they were and their respective place in the world. Their worldview began to be shaped by this new understanding. This created a distinction as they saw themselves as a group different from the rest of society because of a divine purpose (i.e. "the great commission") modeled to them by the church planter and informed by the teaching and practice of mission.

- *Continue to emphasize mission in teaching and example.*

In the light of the previous paragraph, church planters should continue to emphasize mission both in teaching and in lifestyle. It would appear from the interviews that the concept of mission fosters a sense of community and identity, a sense of "specialness" that encourages adherents to join together with others that share that same sense of uniqueness. As has been demonstrated, community is key to sustainability, and therefore should be a critical component of the discipleship process.

- *Continue to move from the programmatic to the relational in both mission and community formation.*

Moving from a model of community that is similar to a voluntary association to more of a kinship-grouping type structure seems to allow the community to develop more readily and form closer bonds and deeper commitment to relationships. Adherents are not so much attending an event as rather participating in a family gathering. As relationships in the community are strained because of the faith convictions held by adherents, a family-like community can be the support network that suffering people need. Particularly in a collectivist

[4] This is not to suggest that everybody in those respective societies held to those values and modes of behavior but rather to highlight that if, for instance, new adherents started treating their family members and neighbors with love and respect this did not automatically cause the family members and neighbors to attribute this admirable behavior to following Christ's commands.

society, adversity (and persecution) is most likely endured best as a community. Deep community relationships are also a powerful and attractive aid to the missional engagement of that community with the wider society, particularly as it proclaims a message of reconciliation. An intentional and ongoing shift from the programmatic to the relational is a much-needed direction to help foster growth and sustainability.

- *Seek to combat the isolationism that is a dangerous trend in the new churches' push for distinctiveness.*

Although cultural distinctiveness is a value to strive for, when coupled with isolationism this distinctiveness may slide into tribalism. The many problems associated with mixing between the people groups have been highlighted in this study. However, there is a richness of learning, challenge and mutual encouragement that is missed when groups grow in isolation. A possible way to combat this is to explore ways for at least the non-Christian background churches to interact. A greater openness to mix with other Christian communities, particularly at leadership level, would expose each of the church fellowships to other communities' understanding of biblical values, truth and how the different fellowships tackled issues in their own particular context. One example could be with the Camp Church, as it would observe the other churches practice mixed worship, hitherto a theoretical concept, and the strengthening of community that this brings. It would also allow discussion of the importance that these other communities place on creating community as family, inclusive of all ages and social positions, and the faith convictions that have led to this practice. A good example of this is the Village Church, which, when faced with the same social restrictions, limited the composition of some of their house churches to those who are related to each other. This social space then allowed spouses and children to participate in the study and the worship. Gathering together as a larger community, beyond a house church, still remains problematic for the Camp Church, yet exposure to a creative solution within a similar context could be a spur to the Camp Church leadership to explore possible alternative mission and community models. Unlike the Camp Church, the Village Church has not adopted the Qur'anic study circle, with its strict gender separation, as its model of mission and community, preferring to model its gatherings around the community practice of regular home visits. Exposure to this type of new thinking could help the Camp Church leadership to re-evaluate its foundational model of mission praxis. One fears that the present model, possibly catering to entrenched social norms, may indeed result in a long-term community expression that reflects less the prophetic challenge of social equality that Mohammed himself senses should exist and more of the status quo found in the camp for generations.

The adoption of an immediate family model of church, practiced by the Village Church, could be an alternative. However, that too brings its own inherent weaknesses with the loss of diversity and a restriction of missional activity by only forming home groups around families. It must be taken into consideration also that groups in the Village Church network were from the

beginning formed around kinship groupings, compared to the Camp Church network where groups were formed along the preexisting relationships established at work or at the mosque.

Recommendations for the Academic Community

- *It is critical to understand that just as the early church movement seems to have been characterized by intense theologizing (particularly by Paul), in the same manner the new congregations need also to be wrestling not only with issues of culture but also with issues of how theology impacts their culture, their contextual community expressions and their missional engagement.*

This is particularly relevant to the Camp Church network as the adherents seek to follow Christ's teachings and declare their faith in the person and teachings of Christ within the framework of Islam. However, this is also needed in the Mountain and Village Churches. In those congregations, as they seek to reject Islam or the Druze religion while still embracing their culture, they attempt to discern which aspects of their lives are cultural and which are affirmations of their societies' host religion. Initially, this has been undertaken by the church planter. However, this process should be more inclusive as time progresses. A coming together of contextual theologians, leaders of the new churches and mature adherents, if possible, would be a significant step in helping to retain these churches within orthodoxy and allow an authentic church expression to emerge within a new context.

If left to themselves, particularly because some of these churches are quite isolated, the danger that culture is the final hermeneutic is quite real. Newbigin rightly identifies the great danger of allowing the context to dictate the terms on which the gospel message engages with society and writes,

> The result then is that the world is not challenged at its depth but rather absorbs and domesticates the gospel and uses it to sacralize its own purposes.[5]

Instead Newbigin calls for a community that is truly local and truly ecumenical. He explains:

> Truly local in that it embodies God's particular word of grace and judgment for that people. Truly ecumenical in being open to the witness of churches in all other places, and thus saved from absorption into the culture of that place, and enabled to represent to that place the universality, the catholicity of God's purpose of grace and judgment for all humanity.[6]

[5] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Geneva SZ, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 152.
[6] Ibid.

Discreet efforts need to be made even now to quietly bridge, perhaps initially at leadership level, the very real cultural and social divides between these new churches and the broader Christian community.

Recommendations for Local Evangelical Church Leaders

- *Be encouraged that these new emerging churches share many similarities with the early church movement in the apostolic age.*

Though at first glance the new churches seem very informal, disorganized and, at best, "on the fringe" of evangelicalism, in comparison with the institutionalized churches present in the Middle East today they are not dissimilar in form to the first century historical churches. As has been noted previously they have formed community, practiced rituals, established their own leadership and now continue to engage their society with the proclamation of the gospel message even to the point of physical suffering. They are strongly Bible-focused, possess a strong sense of calling and seek to live God-honoring lives in their context. These are traits that they share with the early church movement. These are traits that would be common in any religious movement and commonly stand in contrast to the more established institutionalized churches that often began as movements themselves. Of concern therefore is not their structure but their body of theological belief and their potential to wander away from Christian orthodoxy. This point will be addressed under the following heading:

- *Despite the valid argument for a church expression that reflects the unity of all peoples from different backgrounds, for the sake of mission evangelical leaders should resist the tendency to absorb these new congregations into their churches.*

It is fully understandable for established evangelical churches to seek to absorb these new congregations in an effort to maintain the new churches' orthodoxy and to present a declaration of the new unity that the gospel can bring to Middle Eastern society. This would be particularly true for a house group in close proximity to an evangelical church in the city; it would appear to be less practical for the Mountain, Village and Camp Churches. However, this does not take into consideration the historical, strident denominationalism found particularly in the evangelical community and in the wider Christian community in general, which has on occasion undermined attempts to present a united congregation. From the interviews it has been clear that it would also reduce the access points for seeking Muslims looking to inquire of the Christian faith. Evangelical leaders have the opportunity to allow, for the sake of mission, these new churches to continue and grow, as the best viable means of effective witness and relevant discipleship, into their respective communities. Historically evangelical churches have had little success in mission into other faith communities.

If evangelical leaders can accept that these new churches and networks of house churches are valid expressions of church, albeit in its early movement form, then they can also accept, for the

sake of mission, the development of these new churches into their own institutions independent of the evangelical denominations.

- *Evangelical leaders should actively seek to establish relational networks with these new congregations based on familial love, concern and respect.*

Despite allowing the new churches to develop outside of the official evangelical structure, evangelical leaders should proactively seek to establish relational connections with these new congregations, as brothers and sisters in Christ, for the purpose of mutual encouragement, healthy discourse around gospel and cultural themes and for mutual learning (e.g. how do evangelical churches relate to Muslim seekers or conversely how do new churches deal with family issues?).

Interview Questions

Interview Questions – Round One

Questions for Community of Faith Attendees:

Section I: The Coming of the Gospel
(How was the gospel presented?)

- When and how did you first hear the good news message about Jesus Christ?
- What was your initial and subsequent reaction to it?
- Describe then your journey from first hearing about Christ to where you are now in your faith journey in Christ.

Section II: Joining the Church
(Issues of integration and identity)

- When did you first start attending the community of faith that you are with now?
- When did you start feeling a part of this community?
- What were the factors that led to this?
- What is a word that would describe the community of faith that you attend?
- Why did you choose that word?
- To what extent do you feel a part of this community?
- How strongly or weakly do you feel attached to this group? What are the factors that make you think this way?
- How permanently or temporarily do you feel you will be attached to this group?
- How do your family, friends and wider society view your involvement in this faith community?
- What role, if any, does your faith community play in your relationship with family, friends and wider community?

Section III: Living the Faith
(Issues of church practice and witness)

- Describe your typical gathering time together.
- Why do you think it is done in this way?
- How do you think your community of faith compares with other similar groups?
- What changes, if any, have you observed in the group since you joined it?
- How does the group communicate its faith convictions (if it does) to the wider society?
- How does this compare with the factors that influenced you in your faith journey?

Questions for the Church Planter:

Section I: The Coming of the Gospel
(How was the gospel presented by you?)

- When did you first start presenting the good news about Jesus Christ in this area or to this people group?
- How did you present it?
- How do you think this compares with the patterns presented in the New Testament church?
- In what ways does living in the 21st century shape our methodology and principles concerning how we do church planting today?
- Describe your journey from proclaiming Christ to this people group until you formed a community of faith.

Section II: Joining the Church
(Issues of integration and identity)

- Specifically, how did you form this group (if not described in the previous question)?
- Has your previous experience of similar groups or life experiences, reading and study shaped the way you have chosen to start and lead this group?
- How do the members of this group describe themselves?
- To what extent do you feel a part of this community?
- How strongly or weakly do you feel attached to this group? What are the factors that make you think this way?
- How permanently or temporarily do you feel you will be attached to this group?
- How do the group's families, friends and wider society view their involvement in this faith community?
- What role, if any, does your faith community play in their relationships with family, friends and wider community?

Section III: Living the Faith
(Issues of church practice and witness)

- Describe your typical gathering together.
- How do you think this compares with New Testament patterns of church practice?
- How do you think living in the 21st century and among these people shapes your church practice?
- Based on what you know of other similar groups, what are the strengths and weaknesses of your group's church practices?
- Where do you see your faith community heading in the next 12 months?
- How are decisions made within the group?
- What are decisions that have been made previously?

Interview Questions - Round Two

- Describe what is happening in your fellowship in comparison to what you described in the last interview. If there have been changes, what has changed and why?

- How would you teach 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, 10:14-22?

- How do you read Gal. 3:28, 1 Cor. 12:13 and Col. 3:28? Do you regard this as an important value in your gathering? If so, how is this expressed?

- Are there things that you do as you gather that you would regard as particularly (national identity)/Palestinian/Kurdish/Druze/Sunni/Shiite (depending on the fellowship)?

- It has been suggested that the early churches had to create some distinction between them and the rest of society to express the new reality of the gospel. As you read the New Testament, do you agree?
    - Are there things that you regularly do as a fellowship that makes you distinct from the wider community around you? If so, what? And why?
- Are there practices, feasts, celebrations, etc., common in society that you would avoid?
    - If there are, why?
- Do you have new people that come to the fellowship?
    - If there are and they keep attending, how do they become part of the group?
- It has been said that as believers in the early church gathered they experienced Christ together. As you read the Scriptures, do you agree?
    - Is that true also of your fellowship? If so, how?
- It has been suggested that another key element in early church worship (perhaps as an ideal) was the practical expression of fellowship (as evidenced in John 13:35, 36, etc.). As you read the Scriptures, do you agree?
    - Is that true also of your fellowship? If so, how?
- It has been suggested that another key element of the early churches was its commitment to mission. In your first interview you said this … (quote from 1st interview).
    - Is this belief also held by everyone in the fellowship?
- What is the attitude of the church toward suffering, particularly as a result of their faith (in the context of the previous question)?

- How do you appoint leaders?
    - Are there criteria?
    - Why do you do it this way?
    - What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing it this way?
- Does the appointment of leaders in this way help in fulfilling the mission of the church as you perceive it? If so, how?
- Does the appointment of leaders in this way help in building community? If so, how?
- How do the leaders exercise authority? On what basis?

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